

author's note: Hellos all! This is the (rather predictably) the revision of my story 'the Weapon', so obviously, read this one! :) I will add a new chapter every week until the tenth chapter is posted, and then (since I'll be writing new stuffs at that point) updates will probably slow down. I'll try to update this as often as possible, but I can't give y'all any fixed weekly/monthly schedule for that. However, being as how Fanfiction has taken over my social & school life, this should be updated fairly regularly. Lemon drops for anyone with reviews! Lemon drops & chocolate frogs for anyone with negative reviews!

(As awesome sauce fun as it is to get positive feedback, the negative "um...that just doesn't work..at all" comments that rip out little bits of my soul and feed it to the thestrals are hot 'cause they help me make my story better. Do both! I'm a stranger, I'll give you candy!) :

A warning though, I'm going to do my best to make the war against Voldemort be an actual war, so take my warnings seriously (they're in the story's summary). War is not fun, part of this journey for Harry won't be warm and fuzzy either, but my goal is to somehow make it an enjoyable story as well.

Please review me! I do listen to my reviews, and I will answer you! (If you've reviewed me and not gotten an reply, many apologies! My email is , I'll answer ya with many thanks and sorries)

So, we plunge in:

~~HP~~

It didn't seem right that the world hadn't collapsed around him yet. He'd screamed and cried and shattered whatever he could get his hands on but he could still hear the sounds of voices outside the office walls, and the sky outside the window was beginning to lighten, and that didn't make any sense. It seemed impossible that there were people in the world who still desired food, who laughed, and didn't even realize that hell had infected everything to be seen in

Dumbledore's office.

He wondered if this was what shock felt like, but he thought shock was supposed to numb out pain, and his body hurt. God grief was physical and he didn't want to feel it anymore. His body ached with the need to cry but his eyes stung and told him he'd already done that, and it hadn't helped at all. He could feel his stomach trying to crawl out from under his ribcage, even when he wrapped his arms around himself to hold it in. He looked out of the window, and everything was unfocused.

Dumbledore was still talking to him about Voldemort and his parents and very important secrets as if the world hadn't just shifted from beneath his feet. He realized he could hate Dumbledore for that. This was not the time to talk, this was a time to go stab himself in the chest until the pain in his stomach went away.

He couldn't think of the name, or the face or the laugh like a bark. Even realizing that he couldn't think about it made him want to wince and run and choke something until it cried and smashed and bled.

He was hyperventilating. He realized that and concentrated on his breath. He didn't remember why hyperventilating was bad but he'd heard about it somewhere, and didn't care to follow the thought any further than that anyway. He focused on making his breath go in for seven seconds, and out for fourteen. He'd heard something about that too. It hurt to breathe out for fourteen seconds straight, but he did it anyway. It made the pain in his stomach lessen a little bit.

He heard the silence left over from when Dumbledore stopped talking. He glanced around from his sightless contemplation of the window and found the headmaster still sitting at his desk, watching him. There was pity in those eyes.

He looked away, back to the window. It was light enough now to make out most of the grounds. He could see a small group of

thestrals picking their way out of the forest. They were ugly and reminded him of death. Everything was ugly.

He realized he'd been breathing in for too long, and started breathing out.

"Harry, do you understand what this means?" Dumbledore's voice broke the silence, and he was pretty sure he could hate him for that too.

"Harry?"

He realized he hadn't replied quickly enough. The truth was he had heard the long speech. He couldn't remember it, and he couldn't be arsed to care about it at all, but he knew he'd understand it eventually, and that it was supposed to upset him.

"Yes." He answered so Dumbledore would leave him in the silence again. His voice grated terribly along the walls of his skull, but it was worth it. He could ignore everything, if he just had the silence.

"Harry, I will help you in this, you are not alone."

Right. He thought sarcastically, and felt his stomach jerk back and up into his ribs. Having a single real thought broke something inside him and his peace was gone. The first thing he wanted was to clamber back into his blissful silence and never have it go away again. He was Harry, he'd gotten Sirius killed and yes, he understood what Dumbledore had said.

Harry looked at the broken instruments he'd strewn across the room and felt a new emotion join his grief: shame. He'd been such a child! Why had he rushed into the Ministry without a plan? He had to have known a pile of teenagers weren't going to face Voldemort's army with any hope. He could have gotten them all killed. He would have gotten them all killed, if it weren't for Sirius and the Order. He'd

trusted Snape to tell them? He'd trusted the 'greasy git' with the lives of all his friends? Even the nickname for Snape made bile run up into his throat. He was such a child, and it was getting people killed.

Why had he refused to learn Occlumency? There didn't seem to be any reason behind that now. How many people had told him it was important? Why hadn't he listened to Dumbledore, or Hermione? Hell even Snape had warned him.

Harry felt his breath catch in his throat and he turned his face back to the window, concentrating on seven and fourteen. Snape's words returned to him with disturbing clarity, now that they only served to hurt.

Then you will find yourself easy prey for the Dark Lord! Fools who wear their hearts on their sleeves, who cannot control their emotions, who wallow in sad memories and allow themselves to be provoked this easily—weak people, in other words—they stand no chance against his powers! He will penetrate your mind with absurd ease, Potter!

Harry easily remembered the warning now that it was too late, despite the fact that he'd barely been listening to the man back then. He hated the irony in that. But why the hell hadn't he been listening? What could be more important than that warning?

He'd been angry, Harry remembered. Too angry to listen or learn anything. Snape had seen it the entire time, had practically prophesied it, and how ironic was that, that he couldn't learn not to control his emotions because he was too angry to listen.

Sirius was dead because he'd been too weak and too ill-prepared to do anything but play into Voldemort's hand, and yet he was the one who had to 'vanquish the Dark Lord'. Yes, Dumbledore, he understood what it meant.

Harry watched the thestrals at play as his thoughts churned.

Dumbledore had known since his parents died that he was the 'one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord', so why was he so ill-prepared?

He would have studied if Dumbledore had told him too, had told him why he had to study at Hogwarts, but Dumbledore had always answered him with more questions. Harry knew he'd never gotten a straight answer from Dumbledore in his life. It hadn't bothered him too much before, he'd never thought he had a right to know anything, but if he was supposed to actually follow the prophesy, he should have been being trained and taught for years now.

Dumbledore didn't even tell him why he had to learn Occlumency. Of all people, he left it to Snape.

Merlin knows I've been calling the man a Death Eater for five years, of course I wouldn't take Snape's word on anything to do with Voldemort. Dumbledore should have known that, and if I'm supposed to take down the 'greatest Legilimens in all of Europe', he should have made sure I knew how to protect myself. I would never have gone anywhere tonight if Dumbledore had answered even that one question I had for him about why I needed to learn Occlumency.

Harry remembered using Fred and George's Extendable Ears to eavesdrop on the Order. Why hadn't he been part of the discussions about protecting 'Harry Potter'? He'd never have run away from the Dursleys in the first place if he'd known why he'd had to live there. He wouldn't have been so hurt by Dumbledore ignoring him if he'd known why that was happening. Why did he have to find out by eavesdropping? Of course Legilimency had never felt real to him, when 'Voldemort possessing him' was just one of Mad-Eye's many rants on Constant Vigilance.

I'm always left eavesdropping, Harry thought angrily. It was the only

way he'd learned that Sirius Black was his godfather. No one had been considerate enough, while they were all whispering about the prison escapee, to tell him to his face what was going on. He'd had to find out by hiding under an invisibility cloak listening to his teachers gossip, that a man had betrayed his family and gotten his parents killed.

He'd always had to find everything out for himself, even when the pure luck that meant he was able to find out in time had saved the Philosopher's stone, and even Ginny's life second year. He'd come out as a hero those two years, and still Dumbledore had sheltered information away from him like hiding sharp objects from a child.

No, a tougher part of his brain clamped down on his running pride.

No, I've never been a hero. I've just been lucky before. Eleven years old and running after a mountain troll? How stupid was I? Why didn't I get a teacher? Hell, getting past Fluffy, planning to face off with a fully trained wizard teacher? The wrong teacher no less? Running down into the depths of the castle where no one could find me, to fight a fully grown basilisk? As a twelve year old? Without word to anyone but Lockhart? God foolhardy. Stupid.

Hell, I've just been lucky not to have gotten Ron or Hermione killed before. Harry thought over their 'adventures' at Hogwarts, wincing at the memories. And every time an adult would run in and call him a hero, and Dumbledore would award him points for being brave and loving.

Was I brave and loving today, Headmaster? Harry thought angrily, forcing himself to think about the Department of Mysteries. He'd finally learned what happened when pure blind luck ran out. Why hadn't he been prepared to face Voldemort's trap?

Harry searched Dumbledore's regretful pity-filled face, looking for the wise, all-seeing mentor he'd thought he'd had.

He cares too much. Harry repeated to himself silently, finally understanding the 'great flaw' in Dumbledore's plan.

He wants to make me happy more than anything. More than scolding me, more than telling me to grow the hell up even when I needed him to say it, more than teaching me how to close my mind and think and not get my friends killed.

Harry diverted his eyes back to watching a cloud form in the lightened sky as he let his thoughts settle into his realization.

Of course Dumbledore never told me anything, he knew the truth would hurt. I am marked to be a great weapon against Voldemort, and weapons are made for killing people. Dumbledore should have been training me since first year and he knows it, but it's like he said, I was 'young'. The world needs a soldier and he knows that child soldiers aren't children for very long. And he cared more about my childhood than the lives of the people I could save. He was supposed to make me a soldier and he made me into a liability. I got Cedric killed, I got Sirius killed, how many people needed to die before he decided to make me into a real weapon to end this damn war? How many people have already died because this war isn't over yet?

Harry looked around Dumbledore's office, beginning to feel truly nauseated. He was always angry, but he'd never done anything about it. He'd never pushed himself, never studied, never trained, he'd been so weak for so long. Just that day he'd barely been able to fight the Death Eaters, he'd hidden behind a damn statue and let Dumbledore fight for him! He'd had no choice, because he wasn't a fighter like Dumbledore, he was a child. Children were allowed to hide.

Could I have prevented it? Harry thought suddenly, dropping his head down into his hands and clutching his hair. If I'd studied and listened and trained to really be an asset in the war, rather than a kid

for Sirius and the Order and Dumbledore to run in and protect, if I'd been a soldier for years now, would Sirius have lived through this war? Would he be the one teaching me what next Dark Art I needed to protect myself against?

Harry released his grip on his hair and rubbed his hands over his dry eyes. He wasn't ever going to know the answer to that, it was too late for that. He wondered how many more times he was going to find himself asking that same question, 'if I'd worked harder, would they still have died?'.

Never again. Harry decided instantly. He was never going to have to ask it again, because he was never going to stop working as hard as he could to bring down the Dark Lord. He didn't know exactly what he needed to learn, so he'd learn everything and anything he could, until there wasn't a Death Eater left alive to plead mercy from him.

I will sacrifice anything to end this war.

Harry looked up at Dumbledore, and saw how very old he looked. His anger softened slightly, as he passed his eyes over the deep wrinkles in Dumbledore's arms and face. Dumbledore had been an extremely powerful wizard in his day, Harry had been told that for years and believed it, but looking at Dumbledore now he knew why he'd been left so alone in the fight against Voldemort. Dumbledore was elderly, and tired, and had become too compassionate for any man in war.

"You're right, you should have told me this a long time ago." Harry said softly, his anger dying. Harry looked up from Dumbledore's face to meet his milky, regretful eyes, and found himself glancing away almost immediately. He cared about Dumbledore, despite the mistakes the man had made, and it was hard to see him looking so old.

Harry felt emotions bubbling up in his stomach, and knew it was time to leave. He stood up, gathered the shards of the first glass globe



he'd smashed to the floor, fixed them together with a careful 'reparo' and gently returned the instrument to the Headmaster's desk.

"Excuse me, Professor. I have to go cry." Harry said honestly, knowing he was going to explode again and wanting to do it in private this time. He felt something building in his chest, a kind of acceptance of his grief and a desperation to run and scream and punch something into the ground.

He ran, and made it all the way up to into Gryffindor Tower before tears started pouring down his face. He layered silencing spells around the room, and locked the door with every spell he knew. He had a feeling this was going to be the last cry he would allow himself for a very long time, and he wanted to do it alone.

Harry pounded his head against a bedpost as he cried, but there was no anger in it. His anger was gone, though he had a feeling it would come back in time.

He spent the night crying. It came in waves. The worst hit him when he found Sirius's mirror and smashed it and cut himself to bits before he remembered the simple spells that would fix the mirror again. Somehow the dorm stayed empty for him, no one even tried to enter the door he'd locked, and in some remote, thinking part of his brain he realized that Ron must have pulled in a few favors for him from the dorm-mates. He unlocked the door after what he decided was his last wave of tears, and fell asleep still blessedly alone.

~~HP~~

"Excuse me, Ma'am?"

Madam Pince emerged calmly from the back of her office carrying a pile of mangled library cards.

"I know this is last minute, but Professor Dumbledore gave me

permission to get some books out for the summer." Harry lifted his empty schoolbag up onto his shoulder as if it were heavy. He'd already spelled it to look full, but he didn't want to leave any doubt. Madam Pince placed her cards on a cluttered desk, shaking her head.

"Library texts can not be taken from Hogwarts grounds, Mr. Potter."

"But Dumbledore said I coul-" Harry cut himself off and sighed. "He said I should, actually. Honestly I don't think books are going to help keep my mind off anything." Harry looked up at her, hoping she'd heard something about the Ministry attack. Sympathy shined clearly through her usually strict countenance. Looks like she's an Order member, then, she certainly wouldn't have heard anything from Fudge about it yet.

"Books are fragile, Mr. Potter. I can not-"

"Oh I know!" He rushed to explain. "Nothing from the restricted section, and Dumbledore said nothing over-" Harry hesitated, thinking quickly. "two or three hundred years old." The old woman sighed, and looked him over.

"Professor Dumbledore, Mr. Potter, and get them quickly. You're not leaving with more than five books, so chose carefully." She warned as she crossed around the counter with a stack of returned books to be shelved.

Harry felt his body relax at his success, and noted her maneuvering to watch him. She followed him out into the main area of the library and began the horrendously slow process of returning books to their shelves by hand. She taught all the Hogwarts students the spell to re-shelve books in their first year, and Harry still remembered her warning never to re-shelve books by hand, as it tended to damage them.

Harry decided to wander around the library where she could see him for awhile, hoping she'd get too bored or too worried about damaging her books to bother pestering him for long. He pretended to ponder over volumes in front of her, before spelling them carefully back to their shelves, only to chose another at random. In his head he was trying to create a list of the kinds of books he would focus his search on. By the time he'd decided not to bother learning about arithmancy, herbology, runes, or potions, Madam Pomfrey had disappeared back into her office.

Harry started in the Magical Theory section, and worked his way around the library by subject matter. He shrank entire volumes of books at a time. He knew how small they could go before being damaged, and he filled his bag with the tiny books on occlumency, magical theory and methodology, spell creation, transfiguration, charms and the few dark magic guides that had survived outside the Restricted Section.

Sneaking into the Restricted Section was easier than ever during the day. It wasn't even locked, but he still didn't dare linger. Nor could he open or shrink these books; he'd learned the hard way that they would scream if disturbed at all, and shrinking books protected against tampering (which these almost certainly were) could damage them terribly. Unable to open the books nor linger over each volume, Harry picked up the largest books he could find on highly powerful offensive magics, and fit them in his bag, packed around the miniatures. He snuck out of the Restricted Section with his bag legitimately heavy, though it didn't look any more stuffed than when he'd entered. He picked out four obviously innocuous textbooks to carry in his arms past the front desk.

Madam Pince nodded at him as he left, clearly unaware that he was walking down to breakfast with over thirty of her books.

~~HP~~

"Harry, you've got to eat something." Hermione sounded worried. He'd been thinking about Sirius, and the books in his bag that were too late to save him. Harry looked down at his plate. He'd taken a bite out of his sausage and left it; an uncommon occurrence. He never wasted food, but it was different this morning; Breakfast tasted like corpses. Most of the students chattered noisily around them. They didn't know what had happened, Harry remembered, but their laughter still sounded obscene. He ignored them.

"Harry, are you going to get through this summer all right?"

Harry looked up, realizing that he'd never answered Hermione's comment, and that she was holding his hand from across the table. She knows about the Dursleys. Some alive part of his mind realized. Harry looked up, and saw it in her eyes.

"I will survive the summer with them." He responded, a few seconds late. She looked startled about something, then hurt, then worried, then determined. Are we all so easy to read? He wondered dully. 'Fools who wear their hearts proudly on their sleeves' Harry remembered with a wince, and promised himself he'd learn to keep a blank face. He struggled to lift his frown into a straight line now, and keep it there.

"I'll miss you Harry." She said it like it was exceedingly important information to impart to him. "We all will. We love you." She tightened her hold on his hand and managed to elbow Ron with the other arm.

"Yeah, Harry." Ron added awkwardly. Hermione glared at him. "Hey man, are you alright?" Ron managed to say it sincerely this time, despite still getting elbowed in the ribs. Hermione stopped suddenly and looked apologetically at Harry as if realizing that the motion looked too happy and teasing to be around him. Harry silently agreed with her, but couldn't get himself to react to the sympathy he saw in her eyes. He wasn't sure if he was supposed to appreciate it or be annoyed by it. Harry looked at Ron, and saw that same concern

there.

He smothered his reaction to snap about how obviously not alright he was, or to explain that the only thing he wanted was to be left alone in the silence so he could study. It was surprisingly easy not to react; he was too tired to get angry, but then he wasn't sure what he was supposed to say. He decided to go with the truth, and hope they didn't ask him any questions that would make him speak again.

"I feel...hollow."

It was true. He'd gotten out all of his rage and tears the night before, and he'd found the terrifying truth that there was nothing left to him. He felt as if, were Hermione to press her hand into his any harder, his skin would crack and crumble into itself, revealing nothing more inside him than a little bit of dust, maybe. As soon as he'd thought it, Hermione tightened her hold for a second, as if testing him. Harry wondered if the only thing that kept him in one piece was the question that kept repeating in his head. He'd woken up to it. I will sacrifice anything, right?

"Ron, could you take Hedwig this summer?" Harry asked suddenly, remembering how angry she made Vernon, and how much time it took to keep her cage clean.

"Uh, sure, Harry." Ron answered hesitantly, though his eyes looked hopeful.

"You can send messages with her whenever you want." Harry added. Ron grinned at him. Harry knew Ron would usually make a joke from that, bowing down and professing how thrilled he'd be to help a friend in need, and silently thanked Ron for not trying to make him smile. Harry didn't want to fake it.

"But, err..guys, I've gotta go." Harry pulled his hand from Hermione's soft grip and stood up.

"Where do you have to go? There's nothing left to do but eat and leave." Ron asked him.

"I'll see you guys in the train, okay?" Harry left.

He had to run up to the Tower to have time to pack. He had to return all the books to their exact natural size, else the text would be unreadable, and the gentlest spells took finesse. He would have preferred to spend more time on the difficult project, but he'd be restricted from using any magic as soon as he left Hogwarts, and most of his dorm-mates were probably ready for the train already. For the first time Harry was grateful that he'd never had enough possessions to even properly line the bottom of his trunk, for now he found himself struggling to fit the books and his spare clothing in at the same time. By the time he'd managed, his wingardium leviosa barely lifted the trunk above the ground, and it shook terribly, but that would have to do.

He finished just in time; the minute he snapped the final latch on his trunk closed, a popping sound heralded the arrival of a house-elf coming to bring the student's possessions down to the train

"Young Master better hurry, sir, the rest of students are all gathering to be going now." The house-elf warned after a bow.

"Thank you." Harry responded, sparking another set of low bows. Harry was glad it wasn't Dobby, he didn't think he could handle the elf's gratitude right then, or noise in general really. He'd have given up his fortune for the chance to lock himself away and ignore the world for a little longer before the train ride 'home'. His nerves were so on-end he was almost vibrating with the need for a good fist fight with someone, and he felt far from able to control his temper, a skill he'd need to be able to handle the Dursleys without hexing any of them.

Harry walked down to the Great Hall, not caring if he was a few minutes late. Someone would almost certainly be later than he anyway. He was right; three girls came careening down the hall to the Main Entrance right after he'd arrived. They were first years, and had come dragging their trunks the entire way. Harry got out of their path, and looked around for Ron and Hermione.

"Potter." A smooth voice called to him before he'd found his friends. Harry pulled his wand into his hand before he looked over to see Malfoy leaning casually against the front entrance door. The blond pushed himself off from the door and stalked toward Harry, followed quickly by Crabbe and Goyle.

Maybe I'll get my fight in after all.

"Don't mess with me Malfoy." Harry was surprised at how angry his voice sounded. He didn't think he was that angry...Still, he had to work on that. Fools who wear their hearts proudly on their sleeves, who cannot control their emotions... Suddenly Harry found himself respecting Draco's blank face and casual slouch; he had no idea if the boy was about to hex him or ask what the Potion's summer homework was. Not that Harry doubted Malfoy's aggressive motives for a minute, but he respected Malfoy's ability to maintain the ambiguity.

"You're dead, Potter." Malfoy pronounced in a low voice.

So much for ambiguity.

Harry raised his eyebrows, but didn't bother responding. Hermione usually waited beside the entrance doors, and Harry returned to looking for her. He was surrounded by teachers and students, Malfoy wouldn't be stupid enough to hex him here.

"You're going to pay," said Malfoy in a voice barely louder than a whisper. "I'm going to make you pay for what you've done to my

father. . ."

"Well, I'm terrified now," said Harry sarcastically, glancing back at the boy. "I suppose Lord Voldemort's really just a warm-up compared to you--what's the matter?" He said, for Malfoy looked stricken at the name. "He's your dad's mate, isn't he? Not scared of him are you?" Harry pulled his eyes off the blond to scan the crowd again.

"You think you're such a big man, Potter." Malfoy sneered as he advanced with Crabbe and Goyle flanking him. "You wait, I'll have you. You can't land my father in prison--"

"I'll take your word on that, Malfoy." Said Harry idly, still not bothering to look at his so-called 'rival'. The whole idea of a Hogwarts rivalry seemed childish now, and he certainly wasn't scared by the blond, especially when Draco was in a terrible place to start sparking off hexes. The boy was still a coward, he hadn't changed at all since the night before.

Of course he hasn't.

It was odd to think as anything being the same as before the Ministry.. Harry felt the thought punch him in the stomach and cut off the thought before it started haunting him further.

"The Dementors have left Azkaban, my Dad and the others'll be out in no time. . ."

"Yeah, I expect they will," said Harry truthfully, finally spotting Ron and Hermione running towards the crowd together. "Enjoy your summer, Malfoy." Harry added, glancing at the boy.

Malfoy's hand flew toward his wand, but Harry was too quick for him. He had drawn his own wand before Malfoy's fingers had even entered the pocket of his robes. Crabbe and Goyle hadn't even thought to move yet.



"Potter!" Snape's voice rang across the entrance hall; the man had emerged from a staircase leading up from the dungeons, and at the sight of him Harry felt a rush of anger beyond anything he felt towards Malfoy...So the man was supposedly loyal to Dumbledore; that would be almost worse. That would mean he'd failed at teaching Occlumency not due to malicious motives, but because he was too childish to get past his own Hogwarts rivalry that should have died so many years before.

'Fools who cannot control their emotions, who wallow in sad memories and themselves to be provoked, Harry wanted to snarl, but held his tongue. It was his own idiocy that had led to Sirius's death, Harry reminded himself. He had to study, had to improve, had to get a handle on his own damn temper. Snape had told him to practice, and he hadn't. Snape had warned him. It was his own fault.

"What are you doing, Potter?" said Snape coldly as ever, as he strode over to the four of them.

"I was defending myself, Professor, now I am walking away." Harry answered, before turning to where Ron and Hermione were approaching. He heard Snape's voice call something after him, and McGonagall get in a word, but Harry was soon too far into the crowd to hear the teacher's exchange. It didn't matter to him, and it was time to get to the train.

~~HP~~

"This sucks, mate." Ron stood, looking at Harry, though it didn't seem like he expected a response. Harry appreciated that. There wasn't much more to say.

They were saying goodbye before they crossed over Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  to the Muggle world. It was always far too crowded to say goodbye in the Muggle side of the train station; they'd learned that second year.

They stood in silence for a moment as swarms of students rushed ignorantly by them. Hermione looked ready to cry. Harry nodded when the silence began to feel forced, and braced himself as Hermione rushed forward for another hug. He hugged her quickly and passed her to Ron, who grinned at him shyly. The two said goodbye again, and left together. Harry turned away to levitate his heavy trunk onto a waiting pushcart and hoped the process wouldn't draw too much attention to himself. Glancing around he realized he was the last on the platform, and he turned quietly to his challenge.

The trunk seemed to lift itself easily onto the cart, almost on its own. Harry blinked, then saw Fred and George approaching him, seemingly appearing from no where, and with their wands nowhere in sight. Harry wasn't fooled, and nodded in thanks for their help with his trunk.

Non Hogwarts students weren't allowed onto platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  on leaving day. Harry had been told no one else could get past the barrier, but obviously the twins had found a way. Harry hoped he would know a way to do that by the end of the summer, surely two months of studying would give him something to work with.

"Heavy trunk, Harry?" Fred or George asked him, though for once there wasn't a hint of humor in the normally-light voice.

They lost Sirius too.

Harry found himself mourning that humor though, before he even realized what they'd said.

They spelled it to look inside, he realized, and raised wary eyes to them, cursing himself for being so constantly vulnerable.

A liability. A cruelly incessant bit of thought reminded him. Harry focused his wary gaze on the twins, quietly imparting the message

that he knew what they'd done and that he didn't like it.

"Don't worry Harry, no one will see through it now." The other added confidently. Harry was about to hush them before he remembered the platform was empty. Harry shook his head.

Trust Fred and George to know how to hide things. Stolen books especially, I guess. He tried to smile at them, though he feared the expression had failed terribly. One of them sighed slowly, and for once the somber sound didn't seem sarcastic at all.

"Harry, we were having a thought about your home situation." Harry wondered why they looked as grim as he about mentioning the Dursleys, then remembered his second year summer. They'd seen the bars on his windows, Vernon's rage, the locked door, the cat-flap. Harry rolled his head back to stare at the train station ceiling, hoping for a bit of privacy while he forced his face out of a grimace.

Damn, does everybody know? He thought he'd hidden the truth so well, but apparently it had slipped out over the years.

"We thought of something, you know, if things get...fired up out there, and you needed a bit of..umm...what's the word, Fred?" George started, the humorous glint in his eyes returning slowly.

Fred looked around the platform, held out a fist, and opened his hand. Harry flinched as a cylinder of fire rushed out of Fred's palm for a second with a heavy whoosh. The flames died instantly as he closed his hand.

"Persuasion." Fred supplied.

For the first time in what felt like months, Harry felt his face work itself into a grin of his own, though somehow it felt malicious.

Harry saw Fred catch George's eyes, and George blinked once, as if in answer.

"Show me." Harry ordered, hoping they were not rethinking their offer of "persuasion". Fred opened his hand again, and revealed a handful of gray stone-like chips that looked like broken slate. He carefully dropped the remains and kicked them down into the Hogwarts Express tracks. George pulled a small jar out of nowhere and opened it for Harry. Inside were what looked like red pebbles. George selected three and handed the jar to Harry.

"Prototypes, you see." George explained.

"Fred's Fabulous Firestones" George supplied, holding the three out on his palm for Harry to examine. "He thought of them first. They are supposed to disintegrate into a powder, and we're hoping to work on the flame's shape, and the sound effect, but for now they're all we've got."

"And right now you've got to use three to get any impressive reaction at all. That'll probably change too." Fred added. "So, for now at least, take at least three."

"Then, just crush them in a closed fist, and open." George closed his fist quickly, and opened his hand sideways. The flame burst onto the stationary train as the chips fell from his palm.

"The flame will stop after three seconds, so if you count right, you can close your fist and make it look like you're controlling it." Fred explained. "The fire won't burn anything, of course, but I'm sure you're muggles will be..thrilled." Suddenly his light voice went serious, and the humor in his eyes died out.

"Convincing." Harry complimented, trying to get his dead voice to express his thanks. "This will help, I'll find a way."

Fred and George grinned back at him, though there was something intensely serious about their expressions.

"Well we do find that work gets done best in a peaceful, quiet place. Hopefully fake fire will help." Fred supplied.

"Take care of yourself, Harry." George advised as they walked together toward the brick wall separating Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  from the muggle world.

"I will." Harry returned, his voice carrying a thousand angry words. Fred looked back and searched Harry's face with his eyes, before nodding once, and following his brother across the wall.

Harry found his trolley deceptively light when he went to push it. He wished he'd thanked the twins for their help, especially upon learning that they'd used some kind of permanent weight-lessening charm. Harry hadn't even known that such a thing existed. He'd have to learn that one, he noted.

As Harry crossed into the muggle world, he looked warily for his uncle, always half-expecting to find the platform empty. Instead he found a grouping he'd never have expected. Mr. Weasley, Lupin, and Mad-Eye of all people were gathered in front of his now clearly enraged uncle and ridiculously cowed-looking cousin. Harry approached, wondering what on earth the group would have to talk about.

"Are you threatening me, Sir?" Vernon was saying so loudly that a passerby actually turned to stare.

"Yes, I am." Said Mad-Eye, who seemed rather pleased that Vernon had grasped this fact so quickly.

"And do I look like the kind of man who can be intimidated?" Barked Vernon, though Harry could see his hands were shaking, and his eyebrows had arched like they did when he was scared.

"Well.." Said Moody, pushing back his bowler hat to reveal his sinisterly revolving magical eye. Vernon leapt backwards in horror and collided painfully with a luggage trolley. "Yes, I have to say you do, Dursley." Mad-Eye turned away from Vernon to survey Harry. "So Potter...give us a shout if you need us. If we don't hear from you for three days in a row, we'll send someone along..."

Aunt Petunia whimpered piteously. It could not have been plainer that she was thinking of what the neighbors would say if they caught sight of these people marching up the garden path.

"Oh, I'm sure there'll be no need of that." Harry remarked, carefully keeping his hand away from the jar in his pocket. Moody turned both eyes on him, a silent 'you're sure?'.

"The muggles will not make trouble, I have no fear of that." Harry left that hanging, and turned to say goodbye to his clearly worried friends. He'd need them not to worry, and to stay out of his way, until the war's end.

So he forced a smile, raised a hand in farewell, turned his trolley, and led the way out of the station toward the sunlit street, with Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia and Dudley hurrying along in his wake.

~~HP~~

Harry took the front passenger seat as soon as he reached the car. He'd never sat there in his life. That had to change now too. Harry wasn't sure how he knew it, but he was sure that if he didn't start taking control of the Dursleys right away, he'd never get himself to do it, despite how much he needed to be left alone for the summer. Vernon allowed the move, apparently still feeling Moody's eyes on his back, but his hands and face were shaking with rage now as he steered the car from the parking lot.

He's probably planning on skinning me alive once we're out of sight.

Once the image of Vernon's shaking jaw would have set Harry shuddering, but he couldn't muster up any reaction to it at all, except a kind of concentrated waryness at the thought of what he'd need to do to survive Vernon's boiling reaction. Harry slipped a hand into his pocket, and popped open the jar, allowing the stones to rattle into his pocket. He suspected he was going to want them close by.

Vernon pulled the car into the driveway too quickly, and forced it to a stop with a jerk on the parking break.

Harry allowed his aunt and uncle to slam their way into the house on their own.

Bless you Weasley twins Harry thought as he managed to lift his still-light trunk out of the car boot and carry it by hand into the Dursleys' home as if it were filled with nothing more than Lockhart's frozen pixies.

Vernon and Aunt Petunia were both waiting for him inside, looking furious. Harry bent down to lower his trunk to the ground slowly, remembering a time when their flushed faces would have sent him running for cover. He returned his hand to his firestones as he stood up.

And here we go.

"Get into that kitchen, boy." Petunia snapped at him, though her horse-like face was almost as pale as Nearly Headless Nick.

She's testing me.

Even recognizing that, Harry felt the pull to just do what they wanted, and do it quickly.

"No, I don't believe I will. I have studying to do and I need you to allow me to do it in peace." Harry stated clearly, doing his best to speak like Snape and concentrating on the feeling of fierce determination that hadn't faded since he'd left Dumbledore's office. Snape had always gotten people to obey him, whether they liked him or not, and Harry was hoping to recreate the exact same affect with his voice.

His body felt more still than it ever had before, and his mind a little bit more clear, as he stood and faced them calmly. It was anger, Harry figured, and that same determination. He didn't feel brave exactly, he just knew that he had to study, had to learn not to get friends killed, and if that started here, then of course he faced them. It was a focused kind of feeling, and Harry felt the thick weight of grief in his stomach lesson a bit under it.

Meanwhile Vernon was turning purple and his veins were sticking out of his neck like thick lines of bloody rope.

"You will not give us orders, boy." Vernon growled.

"I didn't." Harry answered, unable to think of a better thing to say.

"You will obey your aunt. Go to your room."



Vernon clenched a fist as he spoke, Harry noticed.

"She told me to go to the kitchen." Harry replied.

Stupid to antagonize them. I need to be strong, they will rip me apart if I'm stupid now. Damn it I don't know how to do this.

Harry pulled his back straighter, and forced himself to match Vernon's furious gaze with a cold look of his own. It was interesting, Harry noted, that suddenly Vernon didn't intimidate him the same way anymore. It used to be so immediate: Vernon was angry so he was cowering, but now, Vernon's glare was just a facial expression, and Harry had seen so many glares in his lifetime, and too much actual horror to be frightened by them. Why was he supposed to be scared of a man he could kill with two words, when he was preparing to face Voldemort? Vernon's brute strength just looked pathetic.

"I can kill you, I can kill all of you. Two words, that's all I need to say and you're a corpse. I wouldn't be ordering a wizard around, if I were you." Harry said, careful to keep his calm gaze looking straight into Vernon's eyes. Petunia was irrelevant, she would obey Vernon whenever the muggle man was angry.

"YOU WILL NOT SAY THAT WORD IN MY HOUSE!" Vernon roared, spittle flying toward Harry. It was as if the man hadn't heard the threat in Harry's words at all, just the forbidden mention of 'wizards'. Not for the first time Harry wondered if there was something truly disturbed in Vernon's aversion to magic.

"I will do whatever I want, Vernon. And if you get in my way, I might just kill you and have the house quiet for once." Harry answered calmly, hoping the muggle wouldn't call his bluff, or just start laughing at how over-dramatic his idle threats sounded. He knew his uncle was just stupid enough to try that too.

Once again Harry sent a silent thanks to the Weasley twins for the

firestones, those stones might just win him this encounter. He wasn't going to spend another summer doing muggle chores, which meant he needed to gain control of the house, and now that he'd angered Vernon, it was even more critical that he gained and kept control over the muggle family, else he might just find himself with a broken wand and Vernon's belt hissing through the air overhead.

YOU-WE-I WILL NOT BE THREATENED IN MY OWN HOUSE!" Vernon managed to stutter as he roared, his spittle flying toward Harry.

"Not...intimidated, Vernon?" Harry tried to capture Snape's drawl. He came out with a pale imitation but his uncle didn't seem to notice. The man had gone from angry purple to terrorized white in a matter of seconds.

"You-you can't-not outside that school!" Vernon blubbered, suddenly sounding just as cowardly as his son as he glanced at Petunia for confirmation.

"That was true, last year. But I'm entering my sixth year now. I'm allowed to do magic whenever I want." Harry threw the offending word in Vernon's face, wishing he could feel the satisfaction that the defiance would have given him years before. He felt too old for that now.

"He's lying!" Petunia squeaked, shaking a finger towards Harry. "Seventeen, they have to be seventeen!"

"How much are you willing to bet on that?" Harry barely glanced at her before returning his gaze to his uncle. Vernon was quick to look away. Harry kept his eyes on Vernon's now nervous looking face.

"Remember, I can kill all of you. Avada Kedavra, two words. Imperio, and you will do whatever I want whether you're scared of me or not. Incendio, and this house is on fire. Obliviate, and you forget you ever

had a house, or a wife, or a son. So Don't Fucking Mess with me. " Harry bit out slowly, watching as Vernon turned green, then white, then purple with rage, then white with fear again as the muggle caught and stopped his own reaction. Vernon was properly cowed.

Harry nodded and turned his back on the furious man to pick up his trunk, a clear challenge. His uncle didn't even move.

"Vernon, you will go to work every day, and be quiet while you are home. Petunia, you will cook breakfast, lunch and dinner, you will make enough for four. Dudley will stay away from me." Harry ordered, holding his trunk. He didn't worry about having his hands occupied now, somehow he knew the conflict had passed, at least for today. The slender woman paled a few shades lighter and glanced at Vernon, but when the man stayed silent, she turned toward the kitchen. Harry walked past them both to lift his trunk up the stairs to his bedroom. He had over thirty books to read, and he wanted all of them memorized and understood before the end of the summer.

~~HP~~

Shite." Harry dropped his aching eyes into his hands and groaned. His head hurt too much; he wouldn't learn anything more until it stopped. He hated studying, hated the headache that never fully went away anymore. He hurt all the time, his head, his hands, his back. He'd spent his time awake and studying, slumped over his chair almost eighteen hours a day, for more than two weeks now. He went to bed at 5:30 PM, when Vernon came home and the house became distractingly loud, and woke up four hours later. He was showered, dressed, fed, and studying by 10:00 PM, and continued working through the entire night and day waiting until he could finally collapse into bed again. It was miserable.

He had been sitting at his desk in front of his bedroom window for the best part of ten hours now, memorizing spells from a book at his elbow. An alarm clock, repaired by Harry several years before ticked

loudly on the sill, telling him he had another 9 ½ hours to go before he slept. Beside the clock, left lying where the delivery owl had sat, was a curling piece of parchment covered in thin, slanting writing. Harry glanced at it as he rubbed at his temples.

Dear Harry,

If it is convenient to you, I shall call at number four, Privet

Drive this coming Friday at eleven P.M. to escort you to the

Burrow, where you have been invited to spend the remainder of your school holidays.

If you are agreeable, I should also be glad of your assistance

in a matter to which I hope to attend on the way to the

Burrow. I shall explain this more fully when I see you.

Kindly send your answer by return of this owl. Hoping to

see you this Friday,

I am, yours most sincerely,

Albus Dumbledore

Harry knew he should want to leave for the Burrow, but now for the first time in his life, the Dursley's house seemed like a better option for him. The images he brought up of the hectic and casual home that he loved just looked horribly distracting. It'd been irresponsible for him to love his time there, and the very thought of wasting time made him wince.

His headache hurt, and he missed his friends, but all he had to do

was remind himself that grieving felt worse, and he stayed on his strict schedule. He was even planning on cutting an hour off of his scheduled sleep before the end of the month. So far he'd found that he couldn't function with any less than four hours of sleep a night, but he'd ordered Petunia to buy him instant coffee mix, which he hoped would help him feel less horrid during the day.

The Dursleys were worse off, if their complaints were any judge. Harry forced himself to spend his breaks downstairs, where he allowed the Dursleys to be as rude to him as they wanted, as long as they never actually threatened him. Threats he would not abide; he was careful about that and the Dursleys had learned it. He'd scared the daylights out of Petunia the first time she'd raised a frying pan to him by simply grabbing the pan and holding it until she realized what she'd done. He hadn't even needed the firestones to scare them, and the threats had stopped entirely, which counted as a phenomenon in the Dursley family. The insults Harry allowed because they were good practice for controlling his temper and hiding his emotions despite being sleep deprived and miserable. He figured that if he could learn to do that successfully, he'd never lose his self-control again.

Sometimes Harry felt like he was nothing but self-control and determination now, like he was made of it. He needed to study and it meant he couldn't give himself the time to wallow in grief or anger. No one had the time for that anymore, and he'd done it far too much before. He felt like he was aging years with every day that he passed studying without crying or hexing anyone, like that feat alone was maturing him faster than traumatic experiences ever had.

Harry had tried to start his studies with the sixth-year textbooks he'd nicked from the library, but they referred to magical concepts he hadn't even heard of before. He'd passed Hogwarts' tests by performing the magic; he'd never really needed to understand it before, and he certainly didn't know the names of the 'groups' or 'classes' of magic. Hermione had corrected all the mistakes he'd

made, and he'd gotten by. Now that that wasn't good enough, Harry felt drowned in what he didn't know.

He'd backed up, and started with his first year textbooks, the ones designed to teach 11 year olds what magic was and how to use it. Apparently it was energy that could be manipulated with the mind. He hadn't even known that before, which was a theory he was supposed to have been building on for five years now.

He'd passed through his beginner textbooks for Charms, Defense, and Transfigurations already, they were all written for children and mostly covered spells he'd practiced for years, so he'd only needed to understand the concepts and move on, but he was still only in his third-year textbooks, and things were getting complicated enough to make his eternal headache pound between his eyes all day.

Harry got up, knowing he had to return to the hell waiting downstairs. He stepped out of his room, listening to the house in a desperate attempt to learn where everyone was, which was another thing he was hoping to master before the end of the year.

The house creaked around him. Pipes gurgled with the sounds of running water. Paper rustled, something clinked like a plate getting set down. Vernon and Petunia were in the kitchen, Harry guessed.

"Pass me that plate, won't you, Diddy?"

Harry checked his watch. It was 8:04 AM, Saturday, he hadn't even heard the bedroom door open when Petunia had gotten up.

Harry was trying to master Mad-Eye's idea of 'constant vigilance'. He worked to make sure he always knew where the Dursleys were, even when he couldn't see them, by listening and learning how they walked and what they were doing to make the sounds that he was used to hearing all day. It grated on him how often he lost track of the small family. He'd get involved in something and forget everything

else around him and become vulnerable again. This time he'd been working on perfecting the sickly complex wand motion for a more reliable form of 'Wingardium Leviosa', using his pencil as a 'wand' and a book as a 'target object', and he'd forgotten about everything else he was supposed to be concentrating on.

Harry walked downstairs and saw Aunt Petunia washing dishes. Vernon was squeezed into a chair beside the kitchen table, reading the paper. Dudley was sitting on the counter top, swinging his fat legs and chewing on a carrot. Petunia had reinstated the diet. Harry grabbed a dishtowel and joined his aunt at the sink to dry whatever she passed him.

He hated standing around and watching Petunia work. It made everything feel even more like a hostage situation than it already did.

"How is work going, Vernon?" Petunia asked quietly as she passed Harry another plate, perhaps feeling awkward about standing next to Harry and not saying a word.

"Horrid. I was half exhausted the entire week and almost fell asleep in a critical meeting." The man barked, glaring at Harry as if it were his fault that Grunnings had started laying off employees to survive the quarter.

"Didn't you sleep?" Petunia asked. Harry looked back at Vernon, and saw that the man had tired streaks under his eyes. Vernon caught his glance, and immediately started quivering in fury again.

He's like a horrendous fat morraca, Harry thought, his headache throwing him into a terrible mood.

"Sleep?" The man spat out. "Not a bloody wink! How'd anyone supposed to sleep in this god-damned house with a fucking freak screaming like a bitch at three in the morning?" Vernon slammed his newspaper down and stood up, instantly furious. His chair fell back

onto the floor with a clatter.

Petunia threw a scared glance at Harry, as if expecting the boy to turn them all into cattle at the slightest provocation.

"Now, Vernon..." She warned, darting her eyes between her husband and nephew.

"DON'T 'NOW' ME, WOMAN!" He roared.

This is getting out of control, Harry thought worriedly.

Vernon had been practically vibrating with rage for two weeks straight now. Every time Harry had spoken 'out of turn' the man would turn purple with rage, then white with fear, only to steadily build back to purple. Harry suspected it would have been funny to watch his uncle impersonate a kaleidoscope on a daily basis if he were in a mood to laugh, but instead it was purely worrying. Vernon's rage didn't seem funny at all now; he'd never turned on Petunia before, and Harry couldn't remember him ever shouting at the woman. He'd always been so obsequious to her.

While I'm around anyway, Harry realized with a wince. He'd never thought about how Vernon would act without his skinny nephew to beat on. He'd never thought about Dudley or Petunia, he'd been too caught up with how much happier he was leaving to be at Hogwarts with magic and friends to think about.

Is this the first time Vernon has roared at his family, or has this been going on since I left? Harry thought frantically, before taking a deep breath to return his calm.

Harry put his plate down quietly, and slipped a hand into the collection of firestones he'd kept in his pocket since that first day back.



"THIS WAS YOUR IDEA! YOUR BLOODY IDEA TO ACCEPT THIS FUCKING MISTAKE BABY INTO MY HOUSE!" Vernon tore his chair to the floor with one hand. It landed with a sharp clatter.

"Dad-" Dudley started quietly, trying to shuffle further back on the countertop.

"Don-t" Petunia warned Dudley quickly.

"Don't?" Vernon sputtered incredulously, his mustache swinging back and forth as it always did when he was agitated. "Don't? You DARE give me orders in my house?" He quieted in his disbelief, then his voice grew to a shout again. "I WILL NOT TAKE ANY MORE FUCKING ORDERS IN MY OWN HOUSE! YOU WON'T FUCKING DARE-" Vernon stomped across the kitchen, with his face sweating and a thick fist clenched at his side. Harry stepped between Vernon and his aunt, but the man didn't stop.

Praying Vernon wasn't too furious to fear magic, Harry pulled out a handful of firestones and crushed them in a loud clap between his palms. A column of fire rushed up from between his hands, past his face and to the ceiling. The whoosh from the flames almost drowned out Petunia's screams, but not quite.

The fire died out quickly, leaving nothing but a loose pile of grey chips on the floor. The room was completely silent in its wake.

"Vernon, go take a drive." Harry ordered, staring into Vernon's flushed face. The man glared at him dangerously, his face was playing kaleidoscope again. "Go." Harry repeated, staring intensely into Vernon's fierce expression. In a display of unprecedented wisdom, the muggle obeyed.

The kitchen was horribly silent after Vernon slammed his way out of the house. Harry kicked the pile of chips out of his way and returned to drying plates.

"Mum, what just happened?" Dudley stuttered out.

"Harry did you-know-what, Dudley. His abnormality." Petunia passed a plate to Harry gently as if she hadn't just insulted him. Harry sighed, he'd hoped that Petunia would react better to his defense. But of course not, not if he'd used 'you-know-what'.

"No I mean Dad-"

"Daddy's mad because Harry is in our home, Diddy-kins. " she said as if speaking to a younger child, though her shaking hands belied her calm tone.

"Yeah." Dudley answered, before sliding his way off of the countertop and marching outside.

Harry quickly dried the plate in his hands and followed.

The boy was walking toward the park.

"Dudley!" Harry called out, unwilling to stray far from the house. He knew for a fact that Order members were watching him, and if all of Dumbledore's trusted followers knew where Harry Potter lived, surely the Death Eaters did too.

Merlin knows why I wasn't dead the minute I came back here.

Dudley turned and shuffled back to Harry, looking pale and grim.

"Is it always like this when I'm gone?" Harry asked urgently, wondering what he would do about it if so. He was supposed to be a warrior, a muggle case of domestic violence was not his responsibility, he shouldn't allow himself to become distracted.

Dudley was staring off at some trees across the street. Harry spent

the silence looking at the muggle, wanting to cry. It was starting to sink in how cold he was supposed to become, how focused he had to be if he was going to defeat the Dark Lord. So focused that his own aunt maybe almost being punched wasn't supposed to 'distract' him.

God damn it, I don't think I can do this.

"No." Dudley muttered. "Dad never talks to mum like that."

Harry nodded, slowly dropping his chin and closing his eyes, relieved. He wanted to accept that wholeheartedly, and put his cold thoughts behind him, but he couldn't help wondering how long the Dudley's peace would last. Vernon had set a precedent right there, one that Harry didn't want to accept but also didn't want to ignore. Duty said he ought to do both.

Duty? Since when do I think about anything in terms of 'duty'? I don't want anything to do with thoughts like this. And ironically I'm not supposed to 'want' anything anymore. Hell I'm sick of irony.

Harry forced himself to keep a blank face despite his thoughts and pay attention to his cousin.

"It's not right for Dad to hit you like he does, is it?" Dudley muttered, resembling an obese house-elf with his large pale eyes staring expectantly at Harry.

He's genuinely asking for an answer. He doesn't know that offhand, how sick is that? This family's so fucked up.

"He doesn't anymore." Harry answered, fiddling with the remaining firestones left in his pocket.

"Yeah I guess not." Dudley muttered, staring past Harry's shoulder towards his house. "How'd you do that?" He asked, focusing back on Harry and waving a hand about as if that explained everything.

"What, magic?" Harry saw Dudley flush at the word.

"Yeah." Dudley replied, glancing around as if looking for an eavesdropping neighbor. Harry knew they'd never be able to see anyone who was truly eavesdropping, but still had to suppress the reaction to follow suit and scan the hydrangeas for Privet Drive's share of peeping Death Eaters.

"It's easy, usually." Harry answered, thinking about the wonder he'd felt in his first charms class, lifting a feather. "It doesn't do everything though." Harry added, hating that every thought about magic led back to Sirius, and how every thought about Sirius pushed him straight back into studying to avoid crying.

Study or cry, whoever heard of that?

"Look, I've got to get back to work." Harry apologized, glancing toward the house.

"What are you studying so hard for, anyway?"

Damn, gotta be careful, anyone could be listening. Voldemort can't know I'm trying to become a threat until after I'm safe at Hogwarts. Can Hogwarts even be considered safe anymore?

That was a painful thought. He wanted a place where he could stop being so aware all the time, could screw 'constant vigilance' and lay down to sleep without any fear at all.

Harry reluctantly pulled himself from his daydream and saw Dudley still waiting for an answer.

"I've got my N.E.W.T.s next year--these big wizarding tests that everyone's got to take in their seventh year at my school." Harry said.

"What happened to you this year?" Dudley asked randomly, cutting off the conversation like he hadn't heard Harry's answer at all.

"What?" Harry asked, hoping Dudley meant to ask a less personal question.

"You're all, I dunno, like aware all the time. And you threatened Dad, and you're quiet all the time. You barely even said two words while Dad was...you know. Freaking out. You didn't even get mad."

What, you're observant now?

Harry had to reign down on his temper that told him to roar at Dudley for daring to talk about him, and dare remind him how much his life sucked right then.

Harry scanned Dudley's sincere face, wondering how much personal information he wanted to give away. He couldn't just ignore the memory of Dudley mocking him about his nightmares about Cedric just the year before.

"I won't make fun of you or anything." His cousin promised in a rare display of understanding.

"Oh? What changed?" Harry snarked.

Damn, hide emotion, show only calm, always calm, come on.

Harry hadn't wanted to sound that sarcastic. He reminded himself to work on his speech, to find a way to control his damn emotions for once.

"Last summer." Dudley answered, apparently oblivious to Harry's tone. "You saved my life, I think. With those Demoniter..uh..Demonoriter...Dipomitor..thingys? It started with a D..." Dudley looked embarrassed. Harry was grateful; that messed

up the whole sappy reconciliation moment Dudley was obviously pushing for.

This was taking too long, Harry realized. His headache was lessening, if he started walking now he'd probably be ready to study by the time he made it back to his room.

"Dementors, and it's complicated. Dementors don't exactly kill."

"It felt like I was dying" Dudley contested, with an almost comical shudder.

"Dementors suck energy." Harry explained with a shrug, remembering the explanations made in his books on Magical Theory and Occlumency. "Living takes energy, to grow and breathe and think. You thought you were dying because you felt yourself getting drained, but you weren't really dying. It's different with Dementors. It's like they can specify what type of energy it takes to be happy, and they consume that, which means you can still grow and breath, but you don't feel anything like happiness around them. And if they Kiss you, you can't think of anything beyond misery. It's often said that they eat souls. I don't think that's true, but I dunno what a soul is. You were close to that when I magicked them off you." Harry was looking out down Privet Drive, trying to dissuade Dudley from any attempt at reconciliation.

He didn't want to have to pretend to be friends with the boy who'd beaten him to a pulp every week for 11 years. Still, after his explanation Harry glanced at his cousin, to see the boy turning white with fear, and felt something for him.

"You wouldn't have died, but you wouldn't have exactly lived through it either." Harry explained, thinking over the book on magical energy control that had touched on the subject. The book discussed why people who could occlude could start to protect themselves from Dementors, but had never explained how anyone would go about

doing that.

"And you stopped that from happening?" Dudley asked, looking completely nauseated. Harry watched him now, suddenly curious if Dudley actually had feelings, and wondering if just one near death experience had changed that much for the boy. He'd thought the sappy reconciliation thank you would just be a social pleasantry.

I don't have time for pleasantries. What am I doing out here?

"Yes, which incidentally reminds me that I have to get back to-"

"And I set Dad on you." Dudley recalled, sounding haunted and quickly turning green. It seemed the muggle had picked up on his father's kaleidoscope trick, and was using it for all it was worth.

"Yeah." Harry answered.

Harry closed his eyes, trying to keep his face black as he thought back to that disaster. Vernon has been angrier that night than Harry had ever seen him. He was relieved when getting locked in his room for days was the worst punishment he'd gotten, though cold cans of soup left much to be desired in the way of food. Miraculously the Weasleys came to fetch him before he looked half-starved.

"You were the one to give me food!" Harry realized suddenly, remembering the cans of soup passed through his catflap. He'd assumed Petunia had worried about having a corpse in her 'guest bedroom'.

What would the neighbors think? Harry thought, snorting aloud.

"Yeah, I.. sort of figured it all out afterwards, that you'd been yelling the whole time, and had sounded...kinda. uh, you know, a little scared too." Dudley explained, staring at his shoes.

So you gave me cold cans of soup. Great repentance Dudley.

"So what did happen this year?" Dudley asked, sounding like he wanted his voice to be brewed in sympathy, though he ended up sounding like Petunia baby-talking.

Harry closed his eyes again, and threw his head back to focus on keeping his temper checked and his face expressionless. Flashes of the year before passed over his thoughts.

The dreams, saving Mr. Weasley, Sirius's death, the "battle", the D.A, Umbridge taking over Hogwarts, Dumbledore leaving, Ron and Hermione flirting around each other, McGonagall helping Peeves reek havoc, Fred and George leaving on their brooms, the rockets, the Occlumency lessons, seeing his father being a bully, Snape's furious face, cockroaches and shattered glass landing around him,, soaring over the school with the thestrals around him, He's got Padfoot! He's got Padfoot!

"I really don't want to talk about it." Harry replied slowly. It was strange to think it had only been two weeks since he'd been so blindly stupid.

"Oh. Okay."

The two stood in silence, as if waiting to have something more to talk about. Harry spent the time with his eyes still closed, trying to capture an image of the surrounding area to keep his mind busy.

Whistling leaves, Dudley's harsh breathing, a screen door slamming, the smell of cut grass and pesticides. So intensely muggle. Harry opened his eyes at the sound of a familiar, but ill-fitting sound. A sort of a swaying swish sound in step with the clicking of dress-shoes.

Harry turned around toward the sound, to see a sight that in a different year would have sent him running forward in joy.



Dumbledore was walking passively up Privet Drive, wearing his full formal wizarding robes as if convinced that the muggles wouldn't notice.

"Harry, my boy." Dumbledore greeted as he approached, a joyous grin stretching his wizened face.

"Hello, Professor." Harry said, as politely as he could manage. Dumbledore must have seen through his tone though, for his light smile sank slightly.

Harry couldn't help feeling like the man had betrayed him, though he wasn't sure when that had happened. He just knew that he'd had to start studying with first-year textbooks, and was struggling in his third years'.

It was only then that Harry remembered that he was face to face with a Legilimens. He sank into the bit of occlumency he had learned as well as he could, but he had to stay engaged enough to have a conversation, and he hadn't yet learned how to do that.

Occlumency was about concentration, as everything with magic was. He was supposed to clear his mind by concentrating on a single image until everything else fell away. The first exercise his book Introduction to Occlumency had given him, was to picture a boat half-sunk into water at a 45 degree angle. It had taken him a day to manage to concentrate on the boat for ten minutes straight without flipping it to face the other way, or concentrating on a tiny piece of the boat, or thinking about the sailors falling into the water, or losing himself to think about the water instead. By the time he'd finally mastered that exercise, he'd known what he was going to chose as his 'concentration image' for learning true Occlumency.

He'd chosen to imagine water running down his mind, through his thoughts, clearing them all away. He tried to picture each drop as it went and settled into a flat expanse of water in his mind, and tried to

picture both the movement of those drops and the stillness of the water until he was focusing all of his concentration on it. He'd think of nothing else, which was what Snape was referring to when he'd ordered him to 'close his mind'. The idea was, if someone tried to Legilimize him, they'd see his concentration image, and nothing else.

But now he was supposed to be doing that and hold up a conversation. Harry knew he couldn't occlude well enough to keep a Legilimens like Dumbledore out of his thoughts, but he hoped to be able to detect the intrusion at the very least, though he hadn't yet learned how to do that either.

"How are you, my boy?" The headmaster asked quietly. Harry felt his image of water falter as he struggled to find an appropriate answer.

"I'm grieving, professor." Harry replied, glancing back towards Dudley and trusting that Dumbledore would pick up that he didn't want the conversation to get any more personal in front of the muggle. For once, Harry was grateful that his cousin was around, the muggle made a perfect excuse for him to hide his feelings behind.

He didn't want to talk to Dumbledore anymore. He needed a leader, not a kind old man to share personal conversations with, and Harry doubted he'd be able to continue his occlumency during that intense of a conversation.

"May I ask why you are visiting Privet Drive?" Harry prompted, remembering the vague letter Dumbledore had sent him, and hoping Dumbledore would accept his refusals easily.

The headmaster nodded to him slightly, almost like he was accepting some subtle request, though Harry had no idea what subliminal message Dumbledore thought he was replying to. To get the conversation over, perhaps, Harry thought, and wondered if he should bother trying to hide his impatience better or not. He opted not to.

"I have a favor to ask of you Harry, though I admit I already ask too much of you." The headmaster started. Harry matched Dumbledore's gaze seriously, then remembered that eye contact made legilimency easier and dropped his eyes. He didn't want Dumbledore to know everything about his studying.

"Yes, Professor?" Harry prompted.

"Well, as you know, Hogwarts needs a new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. I have been working for months now to get a Mr. Horace E. Slughorn to come out of retirement, but he has refused me. He wishes to stay in hiding you see, though I have repeatedly managed to convince him that he would be quite safe at Hogwarts."

"Why do you need me?" Harry asked, knowing he was not ready to help the great wizard in anything real. He had barely started in his third year textbooks after all. Harry almost itched to get back to his pile of books. He was wasting time here, and he wouldn't be able to hold up his fragile hold on occlumency either. He should have headed back inside long before Dumbledore had visited, though he knew he wouldn't have been able to avoid this conversation either way.

"Well you see, I was hoping to show Slughorn that he could do great things as a professor. We are becoming quite desperate to fill our Defense position. You see, I've known for years now that Slughorn has a bit of an affinity for the famous and powerful, nothing dangerous, I trust, but enough that you could be of great help to me."

Harry felt a bit of annoyance rumble beneath his grief.

"No professor, I will not go with you." Harry responded, wanting to wince at the thought of wasting so much time to visit the coward but carefully hiding the reaction.

Slughorn sounded quite a bit like Lockhart, and Harry found himself wondering how Dumbledore could be quite so terrible at staffing the school that a fifteen year old muggle-born had made a better Defense teacher than what Dumbledore had found. Harry pulled his stray thoughts away from the professor and back to his image of water, spreading quietly above his thoughts.

"Harry, my boy-"

"I will not be used, professor." Harry enunciated. He felt his annoyance roar up. It felt wonderful. His rushed thoughts and the weight in his stomach lightened, and he could think about something different, something irrelevant to Sirius. The feeling didn't last, and in a second all Harry could feel was his deep-set determination to get back to work. He pushed his anger back under his control, scolding himself for having revealed it so easily. Dumbledore would never need to legilimize him if he continued ranting on as he'd done for years.

"Excuse me, Professor." Harry apologized, and felt Dudley trembling behind him.

"Don't worry my boy, I do say I've seen worse." Dumbledore commented. Harry wasn't sure which boy the old man was talking to.

"Thank you for visiting, Professor." Harry responded carefully, before glancing slightly towards Number 4, Privet Drive.

"Harry, I'm not only here to ask for your help with Slughorn, you know. I can apparate you to the Weasleys on my way out; they would be overjoyed to see you." Dumbledore mentioned, repeating his offer from the letter.

"No, thank you, professor." Harry answered immediately.

"The Weasleys are happy to open their home to you, Harry."

Dumbledore said and flickered his eyes from Harry to the larger boy behind him.

"I know." Harry said.

He knows about the Dursleys. Harry thought, and felt real anger threaten his control again.

"You want to stay here?" Dumbledore pressed, sounding surprised, though perfectly polite.

Harry could feel Dudley quaking behind him now. Harry brought his elbow back slowly to subtly poke Dudley in his side, hoping the boy's teeth wouldn't start to chatter in his obvious terror. Apparently the nudge unfroze the muggle boy, for suddenly Dudley was actively backing up.

"Uh...I'm going to go get some...er..lemonade." Dudley stuttered, before sprinting off towards the house.

Harry carefully schooled his face expressionless, though he wanted to roll his eyes, and waited in silence for Dumbledore to speak.

"Tactful." The headmaster commented, without a drop of sarcasm in his voice, though his eyes twinkled with amusement as he observed Dudley's flight. Harry felt some of his affection for the man reassert itself. Harry hid a sigh, and pulled his mind back to the conversation, and how badly he needed to end it.

"You wish to remain here, Harry?" Dumbledore repeated, looking strangely pleased.

"Yeah." Harry replied, trying to hide his exasperation. He had no reason to be outside now, his headache was almost gone now. Harry felt his skin start to crawl with the thought. Every second he spent out here, chatting with muggle cousins and senile old men, was a clear

example of the laziness that got Sirius killed.

"Well, that's excellent then." Dumbledore said with the same pleased smile. He thinks I'm happy here now. Harry concluded, pushing down that same rumble of anger again, coupled with a kind of quiet disappointment.

It was then that Harry noticed that when they were both standing, he was the same height as the older man. Dumbledore couldn't nod down at him the way he used to.

Harry kept his eyes down, hoping Dumbledore wasn't trying to legitimize him, as he thought about his headmaster. It seemed so obvious now, with Dumbledore gazing so affectionately at him, that the headmaster hadn't been a warrior for a very long time.

But Dumbledore wasn't a particularly good headmaster either, nor a particularly good 'wise, perfect mentor'. It was easier to see, now that Harry was grown and could look Dumbledore in the eye if he wanted to, that Dumbledore had never been the kindly father-figure Harry had thought him to be.

Without warning Harry felt his anger flare up. He'd spent the entire last year screaming with fury, but his anger was rare now and it took Harry by surprise that in one moment he was feeling calm and pitying Dumbledore, and the next he felt furious.

And again, it felt good to be angry. His mind settled and focused, like it did when he found a particularly difficult magical theory to wrap his thoughts around, but now he could focus on a thousand things at once. His hold on his occlumency shield doubled, as he focused on it, and on his anger, and on Dumbledore all at once. Harry remembered all the times that anger had lead to accidental magic in the past, perhaps this was why, he could concentrate when he was angry.

He felt that second level of occlumency he was supposed to get to

where his mind was focused on the ocean of calm water above him as his thoughts flowed freely. His furious thoughts.

Dumbledore had forced him to stay with Petunia for years, even though the 'wise mentor' had known that he'd been mistreated, had seen as he'd entered the Great Hall that first time that he was smaller than the rest of the first years.

I was so fucking malnourished that it affected my growth.

Harry had be thrilled beyond words that first Christmas that even he had gifts, he'd felt more joy than he'd ever had in his life that night.

He'd loved Mrs. Weasley instantly for letting him speak at table and smiling at him and calling him 'dear', because a hug was enough to earn all of his loyalty. She'd gained his love in minutes, andthat didn't happen to happy, normal children. Happy normal children didn't cling to random adults like that and thanks to Dumbledore, Harry had had to accept that he'd been one of those miserable children that adults called "neglected" and "abused". Because only neglected children craved affection and love that much.

He'd figured it out in third year, after Sirius had offered him a new place to stay, and he'd thought for a few precious hours that he didn't have be neglected or abused anymore. And that single thought had opened the levee, and he'd been flooded with thoughts and memories that wouldn't leave him alone until he'd accepted it, that he was one of those children the NSCCP made commercials about, the children that were locked in cupboards and cursed out and hit over the head with frying pans and abused, and fuck, Harry had hated thinking of himself like that.

And he'd had to, because fucking Professor Dumbledore had left him with the Dursleys.

Harry wondered on the side if the water protecting his thoughts could

start to boil. He was getting angry enough for that.

Dumbledore left his precious "one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord" in a fucking basket with a blanket and a note in November on a doorstep with Death Eaters still at large and the war still very much a happening thing, and then had the audacity to think Harry didn't recognize the fact that he'd been left in Hell by the man.

Heh, shite, I literally went to hell in a handbasket.

The single amusing thought did wonders.

Suddenly Harry wanted to grin instead of explode and tear the world apart, though he found his face wouldn't stretch into a smile even as he tried. As furious as he'd gotten, his facial expression hadn't changed at all, but for some reason that meant that it wouldn't change when he wanted to smile either.

Still, his humor gave him something else to think about, and gave him the respite he needed to calm himself and face thinking about his headmaster again.

It didn't matter that Dumbledore could ignore that the Dursleys were cruel to him, and could pretend that it wasn't true.

Harry had handled that truth on his own for years. Whatever 'abusive' experiences he'd grown up with paled before watching Cedric and Sirius die. The Dursley's concept of 'cruelty' was trifling in comparison to grief. Harry turned himself back to the Headmaster, doing his best to think and occlude at the same time, even as his anger left him. Growing up with the Dursleys had made him stronger; it was perhaps the one thing that Dumbledore had done to help him prepare for the coming war. How could he be angry at anyone for that?

"Thank you for visiting, Professor." Harry said, and turned around to



head back to his room where he could hide away in his books for awhile.

"I'm afraid I can't let you go yet, my boy." Dumbledore interrupted his movement. Harry turned himself slowly back to the headmaster, and nodded slowly, accepting the conversation as a new thought hit him. He was practicing talking and occluding, that was perhaps worth the wasted study time.

"I must mention the matter of Madam Pince's books." The headmaster explained. Harry felt himself start to blush, and did his best to suppress it. He'd done what was necessary; he had nothing to be ashamed of.

"Don't worry, I will not take them from you, but I must say, you acted rashly, Harry." Dumbledore admonished, though his tone still sounded too light for it.

He can't even bring himself to scold me.

Harry realized the headmaster had mentioned taking his books away and almost visibly winced, wondering if he'd survive being trapped for three months with his thoughts and nothing to relieve them. He was still annoyed at the Headmaster for being so irresponsibly lenient on him, but in this case he decided to be grateful for it.

"I'm sorry." Harry said, dropping his head as contritely as he could manage. "I didn't think of it as stealing, but I guess it sorta was."

Come on Dumbledore, that wasn't even a good lie. It was definitely stealing. Yell at me.

Dumbledore just nodded at him slowly, and their equal heights made the expression even less intimidating than it would have been.

I should not have stayed out here. I should have left Dumbledore on

the sidewalk, I knew it would be a waste of time, he's not involved in the war.

"Why did you take the books, Harry? What did you have to learn that you couldn't wait the summer for?"

He suspects what I'm doing, or he knows what I'm doing and wants me to 'talk about it'. Harry recognized, and wished he knew which it was. Harry kept his eyes downcast, but he knew that that didn't always work, and that he likely hadn't even heard of half the methods Dumbledore knew to ease a way into his mind.

"I...I was looking for a way to bring Sirius back." Harry lied, running a hand through his messy hair. He never brushed it anymore.

"What did you find?" Dumbledore asked softly.

Damn it Dumbledore, don't you dare screw up this war and then try to stop me from saving it.

"That it can't be done." Harry's voice broke at the end. It was lucky chance; his voice had mainly matured already. It was rare for it to break, and Harry was grateful for whatever help he got to make Dumbledore take him at his word.

"I'm so sorry, Harry my boy," Dumbledore professed in the saddest tone Harry had ever heard from him. Harry looked up cautiously and saw the Headmaster's face somehow looking both stricken and terribly relieved.

Harry found himself hoping Dumbledore would believe him for another reason now.

He didn't want his jovial old friend to have to face the fact that a fifteen year old was doing what he had been too weak to do, and he didn't want Dumbledore to have to see that scarred little boy he had

devoted to Petunia sacrificed to a seemingly hopeless war. It was strange, thinking about himself that way, but he knew with certainty now that Dumbledore had never stopped seeing Harry Potter as the baby he'd left in a muggle's care.

Harry wanted Dumbledore to return to his office and his lemon drops, and be content to fiddle around with the war effort until someone else had won it for him. Harry glanced at Dumbledore's face again, which was contemplating him with a strange kind of saddened pride.

It looked like Dumbledore believed him and would go for a few more years thinking Harry was still that 11 year old who had come to Hogwarts looking 'neither as happy nor as well nourished as he would have liked, perhaps, yet alive and healthy.' Harry remembered the conversation with a grimace, and glanced up to see that his headmaster's gaze didn't feel so searching now. It was a relief to think Dumbledore had believed him, and would leave Harry alone to work.

Still, you don't become Head of the Order without being able to fake such things, Harry reminded himself, even as Dumbledore changed the subject by asking how Hedwig was doing.

"I left her with Ron for the holidays, Sir. She'd have to stay locked up here, and I know she hates that." Harry answered. He'd found himself missing the bird more and more, he hadn't quite understood how good Hedwig was at calming him down with her light trills and loud calls for food until his room was constantly still and silent.

Harry shook off his thoughts when he saw how much they'd wandered again. He could never think straight when he was tired, though at least his occlumency was holding strong.

"I'm sorry, Sir, I have to get back inside. Thanks for the visit." Harry dismissed, turning around again.

"Oh Harry." Dumbledore called. Harry turned his head to glance back at the man.

"I thought, after the incident in the library, that you might be grateful to know that Madam Pince has kindly offered you full access to all the books at Hogwarts."

Harry felt one of his eyebrows raise as he watched Dumbledore smile kindly at him.

He is actively endorsing my stealing now.

"Thank you, Professor." Harry answered with a nod, and started towards the Dursley's house. He heard footsteps following behind him, and turned slowly, resisting the temptation to throw his head back on his neck and groan with frustration.

"Yes, Professor?" Harry asked without turning around.

"Oh, I thought I'd have a word with the Dursleys before I left." Dumbledore's voice answered lightly from behind him.

"No, Professor. We are getting along fine, and I doubt another wizard in this house would ameliorate the situation." Harry answered, beginning to think he had succeeded at sounding like Snape when he spoke, and wasn't that a horrible thought. He'd been trying to sound like Mr. Weasley when he'd spoken to Dumbledore, but it hadn't come out that way at all.

"Ah, yes, I see. Well then, have a good summer holiday Harry."

"Thank you, Professor." Harry answered, and refused his temptation to run back inside and back to his rooms. He forced himself to walk slowly to show Dumbledore that he was a dignified adult, not a rushing child, because one day he would need the Headmaster to stop thinking of him as that amiable scrawny first year, and instead a

well-studied man to be respected and considered, no matter which he actually was. By the time he'd reached his rooms his headache was building again.

Harry slammed his room door, picked up one of Dudley's electronics that had somehow migrated to his room, and crushed it against the wall. He threw the pieces to clatter against the wall beside his barred window.

He was furious at himself, now that he'd finally pulled himself back up to his work, and the feeling of guilt and anger only worsened when he saw the open book waiting for him on his desk. It was nice, being alone in his room where he could smash all the electronics he wanted, as long as he did it on the way to his study desk.

What the hell was that, I'm supposed to be stronger now. I vowed to never again have to look at a dead friend and know that if I weren't so fucking lazy, they'd still be alive. And there I spent what? Ten minutes? Twenty? Outside without a book or a headache, talking with Dumbledore and fucking Dudley Dursley.

"Um, are you okay?" Someone spoke. Harry whirled, cursing himself again for his ineptitude.

Constant vigilance, damn it!

Dudley was sitting cross-legged on his bed.

"Why are you here, Dudley." Harry gritted out as he set himself solidly down on his chair and pulled his book towards himself.

"I..er..He.." Dudley tried.

"Think, then speak." Harry suggested before closing his eyes and beginning to breathe to calm himself down. Seven seconds breathing in, fourteen breathing out.. He'd wasted enough time outside, he didn't need to lose more by ranting and destroying more of Dudley's things. Harry sighed and opened his eyes to return to his studies.

He was already studying the end chapters of his third-year Defense

Against the Dark Arts book, thanks to Lupin's competent teaching, though he was careful never to hold his actual wand while he practiced the new spells' wandmotions.

Harry was careful to keep his wand with him at all times now, in an arm holster he'd made out of duct-tape. He didn't want to break the law about underage magic again, and the duct-tape holster itched, but he didn't trust the Order to protect him; they'd failed five years in a row and while he wasn't sure that he'd survive any more mistakes that sent him into one-to-one duels with the Dark Lord anyway, he knew he'd die if he didn't have his wand with him in an attack.

The truth was Harry had no idea how effective his studying was being. So far he'd been copying each movement with his pen, hoping to learn to throw out a string of defensive charms at a moment's notice, but he had no idea whether or not practicing concentrating on a spell with a pencil in his hand would teach him to cast it correctly or if he was simply wasting a phenomenal amount of time.

Harry felt a bit safer with every new defense spell he learned, but he found himself trying to stretch his awareness beyond the Dursley home, listenong for Death Eaters or Dementors sliding through the suburban neighborhood.

"I was er..avoiding You-Know-Who" Dudley answered finally, jerking Harry out of his thoughts. "I thought if we were like, you know, friends, You-Know-Who would, I mean, wouldn't, well You-Know-Who wouldn't come in your room, would he?" Dudley concluded smugly.

Harry had to think back about their conversation, wondering when Dudley had learned such a ridiculous 'truth' about the Dark Lord, before he realized that his cousin still didn't know about Voldemort, and that Dudley was probably talking about Dumbledore in the Dursley's weird way of referring to magic.

"Can I stay?" Dudley asked. Harry looked up, surprised out of his

thoughts.

"In my room?" Harry asked, glancing around it and watching Dudley blush and glance at his thick hands.

He's still upset about Vernon 'freaking out'. Harry realized, and nodded to him.

"Just don't touch anything or distract me." Harry ordered, before resolutely turning his eyes back to the paragraph in his book that he'd left off at.

Surprisingly, Dudley did as Harry had ordered. Harry felt his cousin watching him quietly for awhile, and barely noticed when the boy tiptoed out of his room, only to come back with his gameboy and a bag of mini-carrots. Dudley ate quietly and played his gameboy with the volume off as Harry studied.

Harry had never seen Dudley stay quiet for so long, but decided not to comment.

Dudley was still there when Harry looked up from slamming his left hand down on the corner of his desk. He did it to distract himself from the pain of yet another crippling headache, which he'd found often worked well. It did help, though Dudley was staring at him now.

"Wanna carrot?" Dudley offered.

Harry felt his eyebrows draw together in a moment's confusion, and the pain behind his eyes spiked. He saw black for a second, before he blinked a few times and rubbed his temples. He glanced at the clock and saw that it wasn't time for a full break yet. He groaned to himself..

"What?" Harry whispered as the ridiculousness of Dudley's question struck him. He'd just quite intentionally mangled his hand on the side



of his desk, and that was Dudley's response?

"I've got carrots. Thought you might want one." The boy repeated, sounding a bit more mature this time. Harry shook his head slowly, feeling nauseated, and not wanting to even think about food. He pushed his chair away from his desk and rested his elbows on his knees. He faced the ground; it helped him to feel better faster when he was too bad off to study.

"No." Harry whispered, bringing his hands up slowly to his head and pressing on his temples in a vain hope that it would relieve the pressure. It felt better until he released his head again, and then he felt even worse. Harry remembered that he'd tried that before, with the exact same results. He'd forgotten. Suddenly Harry wondered if he tried that trick every day, and every day forgot what he learned about it by the time he wanted to do it again.

"Is it still the same day Dumbledore visited?" Harry asked quietly.

"You mean You-Know-Who in the gray suit?" Dudley asked, talking about him calmly now.

Well that explains the robes, must be charmed against muggles.

"Yeah." Harry whispered, rubbing his head. He was supposed to go downstairs now, to get insulted and sneered at until he could properly control his temper. Harry stood up quietly, and felt his nausea roll over him. Harry hated his breaks, hated having to stand up. He just wanted his headache to cool down a bit so he could go back to work and get another day over with.

"Mum and Dad are out. They won this lawn competition thing. They were supposed to go this morning but you know, Dad got all mad and Mum forgot, so they're going now."

"Oh, thank god." Harry muttered, lowering himself back into his chair,

and going straight back into his 'crippling headache position'.

"What's wrong?" Dudley asked, like he'd only just realized that Harry was acting sick. Harry wondered quickly why the muggle bully cared, but his headache pulsed once, warning him not to think any more.

"Headache." Harry answered, hissing in a breath and running his palm over his forehead. "My brain is working too hard. Hurts." Harry continued, whispering and hoping that Dudley would start speaking quieter too. Not that subtlety was the muggle's real strong suit.

"Why are you in here?" Harry asked, trying not to sound too angry, knowing it was the pain that made him want to bodily throw Dudley away from him.

"It's sorta..loud downstairs." Harry gaped at Dudley, unable to comprehend that the screeching boy had just complained about the noise.

That's not a bad euphemism for the bloody miserable state of this family

"Yeah, I hate it too. Makes my headache worse." Harry replied, tucking his head further between his knees.

"Then why are you still studying? Go watch some T.V."

Wow almost friendly-sounding advice from Dudley Dursley. Harry thought, though he shuddered away from the idea of a loud television flashing images at him. Just the thought of it made him feel worse.

"No seriously, why bother?" The muggle pressed, lying back on Harry's bed, smugness clear in his voice.

Like he'd just come up with a whole new life philosophy for me.

"Remember how I saved your life that one time? Imagine if I hadn't been able to." Harry answered, wishing he could summon some ice to put over his head but unwilling to go downstairs to fetch it like he used to.

"Woah, did someone die and it was like your fault?" Dudley asked bluntly.

"Two people." Harry answered.

Cedric too.

"Woah. So why aren't you studying right now?" Dudley asked quietly.

"Headache. Can't learn until everything stops swimming around." Harry answered, slowly pushing himself up again. He had to escape this conversation before it convinced him not to take breaks; he'd tried going without stopping that the first week he was home and had puked all over the bathroom floor after his first shower. Harry didn't take hot showers at all anymore, he always collapsed after them in one way or another, and cold showers woke him up more anyway.

Once Harry was standing he pushed himself into the bathroom to pee, wash his hands, and run cold water from the tap over his face and into his hair. That always helped a lot.

By the time he got back to his room Harry could almost complete a thought without his headache literally bringing him to his knees.

"You know last summer, with the Dementor thing, why didn't you come sooner?" Dudley asked as soon as Harry was back into his room. Harry sat down in his chair and rested his head between his knees again before he even tried to think about an answer.

Nice conversation starter, Dudley. Harry thought irritably before reexamining Dudley's question and decided his anger was mostly his

pain speaking again.

"I was looking for my wand." Harry answered, closing his eyes and allowing the water from his hair to drip down his face and run off his nose onto the carpet. The back of his shirt was already soaked from the runoff.

"You lost it?" Dudley asked, obviously confused.

"You'd punched me. I'd dropped it." Harry replied without opening his eyes. He wasn't planning on opening them until he could go back to work.

"Oh. Sorry." Dudley didn't really sound it, but Harry didn't care. As long as the boy stopped talking before he had to study, Harry figured he'd let the muggle have his big rite of passage growing up moment or whatever this conversation was supposed to be. They'd already had their dramatic reconciliation moment that day.

"How'd you find it?" Dudley pressed, as if no one could grapple around in the dark without something spectacular happening.

"I lumos'd it." Harry answered quietly.

"You what, huh?"

"Oh. Right. Muggle. I did magic." Harry replied, feeling his head fall further down between his knees as his neck gave up holding it straight. Some of his wet hair clung to his cheeks.

"Oh. What'd you do?" Dudley pressed.

Harry considered not responding. The conversation was starting to feel like one of the Spanish language tapes he'd had to listen to in grade school, with the simple question and one-sentence answers going back and forth too slowly to be any real conversation.

"I made it light up." Harry answered.

Harry suddenly pulled his head up to stare straight at Dudley like he was seeing a miracle unfold before his eyes.

"I made it light up, without touching it, so I could find it." Harry mumbled before stopping suddenly and looking up to stare at Dudley. "Cause I was wandless. I made it light up, without touching it." Harry repeated with a feeling of awe falling over him even as his headache spiked as he started to really think, doing exactly what he wasn't supposed to do if he wanted to return to studying as soon as possible.

The ministry never brought it up in my trial. They could have, I couldn't have argued that 'lumos' had been cast in self defense, but they didn't bring it up, despite Fudge and Umbridge looking for any possible conviction. They didn't even mention it, though they'd have loved to, they couldn't've, they didn't know." Harry continued staring at Dudley as each new realization hit him, though the muggle was starting to look nervous.

Stupid, how did I not realize that? I did magic wandless. Holy shit.

Well, all wizard children can. Harry remembered, realizing that perhaps wandless magic wasn't as strange as he'd been led to believe. He'd apparated onto a roof when he was eight, after all. Of course he should be able to do it again, especially with six years of experience with magic under his belt.

Why did I never figure out before that accidental magic is all wandless? Damn it, I am constantly running into my own idiocy.

Harry looked around his room at the scattered books that he'd been struggling with. They all taught the same principles, the same limitations of magic and the same spells that were exceptions, and

he'd had to memorize his way through all of it. For the first time Harry realized how his rote memorization was wasting time; if he could perform the spells he needed to learn, he'd be able to see what they did and perhaps learn a bit more of how they did it.

And either way, wandless magic was a power that Voldemort wouldn't expect him to have learned. Harry didn't know what 'power the Dark Lord knows not' he was supposed to pick up from his books, but if there was even the smallest chance that wandless magic was that power, he had to learn it, and learn it fast. Harry looked over at the open window, wondering if there were any Death Eaters watching in from outside.

"Dudley, go close my window and the curtains." Harry ordered, thinking about Death Eaters watching him casting wandless spells. That was assuming he'd ever manage to cast a spell without being tied to a wand. Dudley waddled over and obeyed, perhaps for the second time in his spoiled life.

Harry felt a strange urge to scream at the muggle for not moving faster, for not running over to the curtains and ripping them closed like he'd him wanted to, was he trying to get people killed with his laziness and incompetence? Then Harry felt his nausea return with a vengeance, though he hadn't noticed it leaving, and his anger was gone.

"You'd better go downstairs now." Harry whispered, mindful of his headache again.

The last thing Harry wanted was Dudley to start talking around Surrey about some cousin floating a feather around the house without a wand. Harry would have the Ministry out there on his ass about the muggle protection act before he even started practicing his newly learned spells. If he was going to practice real magic, he needed to be alone.

Dudley whined, but left anyway.

Harry sighed in relief when Dudley had finally shut the door behind himself, and started to prepare himself for a day of massive frustration.

Harry didn't have any idea how to go about working magic wandlessly. He could barely remember the past summer, much less exactly what he'd been thinking that one night when he'd done it for the first time, while he was grappling around in the dark with a bruise forming around his cheek. He'd just called out 'lumos' desperately, Harry remembered. He'd gotten desperate, and had thought to use his wand to find his wand, an idiot move.

Harry pulled his wand out of its duct-tape holster, and laid it down on his desk, facing away from him. At least he was smart enough now to face the wand away from himself when he was experimenting with it. Harry remembered how often he'd shoved his wand haphazardly into his pocket, he hadn't known not to until half-crazed Mad-Eye Moody pointed it out.

Harry tried to remember how far his hand had been from his wand when it lit up, and placed his right hand down on his desk beside his wand. He imagined having his wand in his hand, hoping that would help him out somehow.

"Lumos." Harry ordered.

He stared in awe. His wand, about a foot from his hand, had lit up a little beam across his desk.

There's no way it's that easy.

Harry stayed perfectly still, listening to the house's creaks and Petunia pattering around the kitchen. He listened for wings flapping against a window, or his aunt's shriek about damn birds that would

warn him that his guess was wrong, and the Ministry knew he'd just performed underage magic in a muggle home, and were coming to take his wand away.

He wondered for a moment, if he'd been rash again. He hated the thought, but had to consider it. He'd just done magic for Merlin's sake. And had barely thought about not doing it.

Because he'd needed to, Harry remembered, rubbing his face back awake. He was just tired, so he was forgetting his own motives for things. It was fine. Harry glanced at his closed window, and relaxed. Even if there were a Ministry owl at his window, followed by an army of aurors coming to arrest him, it wouldn't mean he'd done anything stupid. He needed to be able to practice magic if he was going to learn, and maybe he'd even found a way to do it without the Ministry getting involved.

That was when he started to get excited about it. He could finally really learn now.

"Nox." Said Harry, watching his wand's light go out with satisfaction.

"Wingardium Leviosa." Harry cast, moving his hand in the motion he used with his wand in front of one of the 3 by 5 studycards he kept on his desk.

Nothing.

Harry cursed. He'd gotten excited too soon. Harry sighed and drew a hand back through his growing hair, feeling his expected frustration settle over him. He tried it a dozen more times, getting more and more angry as he ordered the card to float.

Nothing, it was like he could do 'lumos' and nothing else. Harry felt ridiculous waving his entire fist haphazardly through the air, when he'd got used to the refined motions more advanced spells required.



"Accio." Harry tried, knowing he should practice with motionless spells until he figured out how to move his entire hand like he could the tip of his wand.

He almost burst with excitement when the card twitched, though it hadn't moved any closer to him. His excitement turned to annoyance immediately.

It was accio, for damn sakes, he'd called his entire broomstick to him into a forest from a mile away and he couldn't do this. Harry had never seen the spell fail since he'd mastered it with Hermione. Still, he was going to master it wandless.

Harry put his hand inches away from his wand, and prayed the Ministry wasn't sending aurors after him already.

"Accio" Harry growled out, and smiled for the first time since Sirius had died.

His card scraped a full inch closer.

Then Harry's smile melted like it wasn't even there. An inch? That wasn't even close to good enough. He was trying to take out the Dark Lord, and he was grinning like a smug first year making a feather float with 'real magic!'. Harry slammed his left hand down on his desk corner again.

"Accio!" Harry cast again, the pain helping him concentrate. The card pulled forward another inch and Harry's felt his constant headache grow.

"Accio."

The card went came closer, but it was even slower now.

Practice, he just needed practice, like he did with everything else. He'd throw his brain and time and energy at this damn magical skill like he had with every other until he could cast any spell he wanted without a wand in sight. Harry sighed, knowing full well he was preparing to throw himself into an even worse summer, with fewer breaks and less sleep, but he also knew he had no choice if he wanted to learn anything useful before his return to Hogwarts.

Harry walked around his room, gathering up the piles of studycards he had let scatter around the room over the two weeks.

The notecards were how he learned new material. He'd shuffle the cards, and throw them down one by one. Each had a specific spell name written on both sides. If a card landed white-side up, he 'cast' the written spell. If the card landed lined-side up, he'd cast a counter-spell. He'd started with a large pile of all the spells Hogwarts had taught him, and wouldn't consider any new material mastered until he could shuffle the new spells in with his old, and spin through them just as quickly. He'd created dozens of new cards with every book he read, and used the exercise to review whenever he noticed himself forgetting old information.

Now Harry had a new use for them--practice cards. Harry shuffled through them and picked out the simplest and most visual spells he could. He put his right hand in the exact place he had before, inches from his wand, and threw a card down with his left.

Blank side up, 'accio'

"Accio." Harry ordered the notecard.

It fluttered, and almost scraped a corner along the desk, but it came towards his hand. It stopped before it reached him.

Practice, I'm not incompetent, I just need practice.

Harry knew the mantra was bullshit, but it helped anyway.

Pathetic.

"Accio." Harry tried again, and watched the card slowly make its way to his hand.

It comes to my hand, weird. Harry thought, wishing he knew why that was. He decided to put studying that off until he got to Hogwarts, and took out his daily schedule to revise. He had a feeling wandless magic practice was going to take up a lot of his time.

Harry rearranged his studying schedule to make sure he kept plowing through his books and still found time to practice simple castings wandlessly. He decided to practice wandless magic right before his breaks, when he was so exhausted that 'Accio' was the most complicated spell he could even remember. The rest of the time he scheduled for his books.

~~HP~~

Time passed quickly once he'd developed a routine.

He'd reduced his sleep schedule to three hours a night within three days of Dumbledore's visit, and still managed to wake slightly before his alarm sounded. He knew exactly when he was allowed to take a break, and continued studying unless he was 'allowed', Harry didn't know if he'd ever be able to live by any other routine now. Even in his sleep he was occluding; he was always doing something, and the very thought of watching cartoons with Dudley made him want to scream about the wasted time, though Dudley seemed to spend more time sitting in Harry's room than he did in front of the T.V those days.

Harry only opened his door to allow Dudley into his room when he wasn't actively using magic, though it still seemed like the muggle

teenager was always in his room, crunching down his bags of mini carrots and leaving empty cans of diet coke everywhere. Harry didn't know why Dudley preferred his room to his own bedroom, but he allowed the weird routine to develop, as long as it didn't become distracting to have the muggle behind him as he worked.

It was like babysitting a very quiet young boy that Harry needed to stay mildly aware of. The sounds of Dudley hanging out behind him served as random reminders for Harry to keep track of the rest of the family. By the end of two weeks with Dudley Harry could keep track of the whole house as he studied, and was almost feeling grateful to the strange muggle boy, though Harry knew better than try and befriend the bully. There was a good chance he'd end up getting beaten up in the park again, and Harry didn't have time for any bruised or broken bones.

Meals passed awkwardly. Vernon managed to miss most of them for one reason or another, which left Harry, Petunia, and Dudley eating in silence. It was the only time Harry ever saw the adult Dursleys now; every time Harry entered a room he barely had time to recognize their shadows as they left it.

He'd effectively scared Vernon out of the house, for most of the time anyway, and # 4 Privet Drive had settled into a much more quiet summer routine than any Harry could remember. It was lonely, but still Harry preferred the empty rooms and silent meals that gave his headache time to lessen, even if it meant he didn't have a chance to practice controlling his temper.

Harry's occlumency bloomed in the quieter home. Harry spent the hour he'd taken from his scheduled sleep doing what his occlumency book Organizing the Mind referred to as 'concentration exercises'. He sat in the middle of his bedroom floor, and concentrated on a new thing everyday, whether that be an image of a vase or the sound of Pentunia puttering through the house, while still occluding. His book claimed that the exercises would train his mind to concentrate on

multiple things at once, and claimed that if the exercises would properly mastered, they could teach a wizard to cast with two wands at once. Harry doubted that, but he knew that his occlumency was improving faster than his other books expected him to manage.

It helped that he enjoyed doing it. He allowed his mind to rest, and he'd start to lose the feeling of pain as he soothed his headache's pounding with his image of calm water above him. It seemed to get deeper somehow, the more he practiced, he could imagine more and more water above him, and slowly it seemed like it surrounded his thoughts and kept them truly safe. He loved that feeling, nothing else ever felt safe anymore, even his thoughts harrassed him to study and sacrifice more, but when he was occluding, the torture fell away, and his thoughts calmed.

During that hour of meditation and concentrated occlumency every day, he could mourn without needing to study to escape the pain of it. He'd finally found a way to escape, and he occluded at every possible moment, even while he fell asleep.

He didn't have nightmares anymore, perhaps thanks to that. It was a great relief to be able to leave his nightmares and headaches behind and simply his world to in, out, in, for a couple precious hours every day, though Harry still wondered if he was being a coward by hiding from Voldemort's thoughts, when he should be learning all he could. As far as he knew the Order only had one spy in Voldemort's ranks, and Harry hardly wanted to trust the war effort to Severus Snape.

He had to battle with his willpower to keep up his study schedule, once the memories of Sirius didn't push him to study more, harder, faster.

He passed through his textbooks one by one, building his understanding of magic as he went. Magic started to come easier and easier to him with every consecutive study he read. He'd never done particularly well in school before; even in the muggle world he

hadn't found anything that particularly interested him, but there was something about magic that begged to be understood. Harry felt like his books were only skimming over the true depth of knowledge there was to be found in magical study, even when he finished with the Hogwarts' Seventh Year N.E.W.T-level texts and moved onto M.U.L.E (Magical Upper Level Exam) level Apprentice textbooks.

Harry knew how important it was for him to learn everything he could about magic, but even more, on days when he was awake enough to want anything non-physical, he wanted to know everything he could. Magic was interesting, and seemed so un-scientific that he was fascinated by the patterns and logic that researchers had found in it. For every moment that he spent wishing he could burn all of his books and never look at a written word again, he spent just as much time wishing he could hide away from the war forever, and surround himself with nothing but texts on spells and contradicting magical theories.

Magic started to come easily, after he passed out of the Hogwarts texts and into more specialized guides. The concepts and classifications he learned in introductory Transfiguration books were repeated as he soared through his low-level charms, defense, and dark arts texts.

The only thing that crippled his fast progress was the wandless magic technique he was trying to master. It took him three days to be able to levitate his own wand, and it took so much of his concentration that he lost track of the Durlseys for an hour while he did it. He never lost track of them anymore, but that simple spell had done it.

Harry put hours of his effort into learning to 'accio' his wand from across his room, knowing that the ability could save his life someday if someone expelliarmus'd him. It took him hours of practice to realize it was better to cast a spell with his entire hand rather than his index finger, though that made it even less possible to cast spells that

required wand motions. He didn't understand any of the magic concepts involved in wandless magic, but decided not to care until he was back at Hogwarts and could really study it.

"Hey, um, Harry?" Dudley's voice came through with a knock on the door as Harry finished practicing that day's worth of almost-useless wandless magic. Dudley had apparently also learned his routine.

"Yeah, come in." Harry called, remembering that he'd forgotten to open the door when he took his books out.

"I uh..brought you some of our lunch." Dudley said, waddling into his room. Lunch was sandwiches apparently.

"Right. Thanks." Harry answered, kicking himself for forgetting that too.

"Petunia is supposed to call me for meals." Harry remembered with annoyance.

"She did!" Dudley answered quickly, though he didn't seem scared. That was good, Harry wasn't quite sure how he'd feel seeing the recently friendly boy afraid of him, and he didn't want to have to deal with the emotions behind that.

Harry returned to the book he was studying, unconcerned about the crumbs that fell over the pages as he ate.

Dudley was still there by the time he'd finished the textbook's last chapter. Harry ran a hand through his hair, cursing under his breath and ignoring the boy behind him as he walked over to his trunk of books.

He had barely learned anything new the whole day. He'd learned a pile of new spells, but he didn't need to learn more spells. He already knew thirty different offensive hexes, thirteen of them instantly fatal,

eight of them painfully debilitating, and nine of them 'gently' debilitating like the leg-locker curse. He knew twenty different types of magical shielding spells, thirty different 'warding' charms to help him go through the magical world without getting found, and all of the simpler spells he'd found in the copy of 100 spells for the Daily Witch or Wizard he'd stolen from the library on a whim.

Harry dug through the books he had left. Benign Transfigurations, Transfigurative Charms: A Compendium, Distinctions between 1st and 2nd class Benign Transfigurations.. He'd done a terrible job of library theft. He had three books oversimplifying how benign transfigurations worked, four books on historical information he didn't need to know, nothing on wandless magic, and a dozen books on topics he couldn't learn without the use of a wand.

Ron had once told him that most wizards went through their lives using less than ten different spells a day. Harry suspected he'd already memorized more spells than most wizards ever knew or needed.

Harry knew one way to kill a wizard; he didn't need to know thirteen other spells to perform the same task. Most wizards didn't duel with more than a dozen offensive spells in their 'arsenal'. Dueling wasn't so much about magical knowledge as the speed and strength of the sent spells and the magical shields used to block them, and that took practice. Harry had been planning to start training that once he was back in the magical world but he hadn't realized just how much time that would be wasting.

His textbooks covered a lot of material, but none of them gave him advanced enough knowledge to be actually useful in anything. He didn't just need the N.E.W.T-level education Hermione would get from Hogwarts, he needed to really learn what magic was, and really master how to use it, the way Tom Riddle had.

Harry sighed, staring into his trunk of books, fully aware that no



number of texts could teach him what he needed to know. He simply couldn't advance his magic in a muggle home without a wand. He'd learned the simple concepts, but he'd never been able to practice them.

Harry imagined having nothing else to learn and felt his face flush. He couldn't do it, couldn't stay in his room all day with nothing to study, letting himself be that fool again. He had only just started getting better, he never felt his temper flare up uncontrollably anymore, he knew all the terms in his magic books, he was finally able to look himself in the mirror and see someone who was going to kill the Dark Lord one day. Harry looked down at his dwindled pile of books and knew he'd made a mistake.

He'd stayed at Privet Drive for too long, or maybe it had been stupid to even accept returning to the muggle world at all. His book learning had plateaued in less than a month. If he had a wand he'd have a way to practice the spells he was learning, he could practice dueling and occluding at the same time, and perhaps improve on both.

He had to leave. Escape, more like—Harry had no doubt that the Order was taking shifts watching his house, making sure Dumbledore's Boy-Who-Lived was still doing so, and he'd rather not be followed for the rest of the summer, and he wouldn't survive being brought back to the Dursleys without anything new to study. Dumbledore would order one of the two, Harry had no doubt the old man would never allow Harry to actually take care of himself, purge the thought. He was supposed to both take down a Dark Lord someday, and yet still be too innocent and young to survive in London on his own.

"What's wrong?" Dudley pulled him from his thoughts. Harry looked down and saw his hand clenched in a fist. His knuckles were turning white, Harry noted idly.

"Nothing." Harry answered, slowly peeling his fingers away from his

palm and stretching them out.

He wasn't ready to escape yet, Harry knew that immediately. He wouldn't be able to get out until he could cast a wandless anti-searching spell to keep the damn Order members off his back. He could accio a shoe from across the room now, but keeping up a protection spell around himself, even one that needed no wand movement, was still far from his current ability.

"Liar." Dudley muttered under his breath, watching Harry with what looked like concern. Harry stared at him. Once upon a time Harry would have jumped at the chance to have someone in the muggle house who cared about him, but it seemed like decades had passed since he'd been that attention-starved and young. He'd grown up, and gotten over what living with the Dursleys had done to him. Dudley was a little kid compared to him now, and Harry didn't have the time to babysit anymore. He was going to spend all day, every day, practicing wandless magic, until he could get away from Privet Drive and get himself a wand.

"Hey, I've got magic to do, go back downstairs." Harry ordered lightly, taking his wand out of its holster in his sleeve.

"But I want to watch." Dudley said. Even his spoken words sounding like the sobbing whines he made to his mother.

"No." Harry answered, and glanced meaningfully at the door. Surprisingly, Dudley left without further argument. Harry shut the door quickly, and packed his books away.

Hopefully once he was out of the muggle home, and away from the Ministry's restrictions, he'd be able to actually start his learning. Harry attached himself to the hope, and stood up to continue his practice with his wandless shrinking spell. It was too simple of a spell to manage shrinking his books without destroying them, which made it useless to him, but it was one of the simplest spells he knew.

Wandless magic was seeming useless, he'd practice for hours to manage accio'ing even a gram more weight, but he had no other choice, and he'd be able to get himself an actually useful wand once he was away from muggle London. Harry knew he'd gone far too long with a Ministry-approved, age-restricted wand. Harry knew for certain that if he could get himself a wand the Ministry couldn't track, he'd be able to disappear into London and practice magic in peace.

Yay! I finally got my class schedule finished! Go me!

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Dear Uncle Vernon,

Do not look up, speak, or stop reading until you've finished this letter. I am leaving, and if you work with me, you may never have to see me again. If you speak out of turn, you may never speak again. To avoid any misunderstandings, I will clarify; That was a threat. You will not speak unless you are mentioning our sight-seeing visit to London today. Do not be alarmed; you are not going anywhere. You are going to drive Dudley, Aunt Petunia and I to the train station. We will all get out. I will all go to the bathroom. After twenty minutes waiting outside, you may leave, and take them home. Petunia and Dudley have already been informed. You may now speak; Remember my warnings.

Vernon, Aunt Petunia and Dudley were all sitting with their individual letters, so white with fear that it looked like three ghosts had taken their places at the kitchen table.

Harry sighed, and wrote another note down to pass into the center of the table: Say something about the trip to London.

"I'm looking forward to seeing the Tower, aren't you, Vernon?" Petunia started, sounding forced.

"Yeah, Petunia, I think we're all looking forward to seeing the bloody Tower. I'm sure today it'll look so much better than it looked last time we saw the ugly thing, or the time before that." Vernon growled, staring avidly at the window as if wanting to write "help" on the glass.

"We had to write about our favorite city in English class, and I wrote about London." Dudley lied proudly. Harry threw a palm over his eyes, suppressing his annoyance. Vernon sounded the most legitimate out

of all of them. He wanted to leave them behind, they were almost doomed to get him caught, but unfortunately they were also the only chance he had at doing it at all.

Harry nodded once to Petunia, and swung his backpack over his shoulder. They all had backpacks packed; He'd made each of them before they'd woken up. Theirs were packed with clothing and toiletries, his with badly-shrunk versions of his most important books, his least-practiced studycards, his invisibility cloak, and a small bottle of clothing bleach.

Now it was time for the harder part; Harry started casting the best anti-searching spell he could hold wandless, and walked half-blindly to the car. He was as prepared as he could be, now all he had to do was keep up his magic and follow his plan.

The worst part is not knowing if this is working or not, Harry thought as Vernon bought train tickets at the King's Cross train-station. The Dursley family was clustered away from Harry, practically emanating fear from every pore, but Harry didn't worry highly about their acting skills. He'd made sure they arrived during the morning rush hour, muggles were pressing in on them from every side. He probably didn't even need half of his escape plans; Harry was almost certain he could disappear into the crowd and wander around the station for hours without any of the wizards catching up to him, but there wasn't any reason to take the chance. He only had one chance to try this.

It was almost impossible to keep himself from glancing around the crowd, looking for wizards as they crossed through the station. Vernon was vibrating with anger again, probably at the expense for the tickets, but as long as he didn't explode loudly, Harry didn't care. They reached the waiting area outside their platform quickly, and Harry gestured for them to sit down. They obeyed.

"Hey Uncle Vernon, I'm gunna go to the bathroom, alright?" Harry asked as casually as he could. Uncle Vernon paled. "Oh, but I don't

know if they charge, crap. Do you think you could lend me some money?" Harry asked, knowing he was treading on thin ice to keep the man from shouting at him. That would undoubtedly cause unneeded attention, but he needed money if he was going to pull this off.

The Dursleys all gaped at him at the request's audacity. Harry kept his face blank, except to raise a single eyebrow at Vernon's now-furious face. The man took out his wallet to count out a bill, and Harry threw his palm out.

"Thanks." He said casually. Vernon got the message surprisingly quickly, and offered Harry the thick wallet. Harry nodded at him, and walked to the bathroom, convinced they would leave before the requested twenty minutes ended.

Once he made it to a stall, Harry knew he had to act fast. He ripped open his backpack and threw his invisibility cloak over himself, and rushed out of the stall, dodging muggles as he went. With only one person under the garment, it was possible to run beneath it, but the train station was too crowded for that. Harry did his best to hurry along the walls and between muggles without hitting anyone. It was hard to remember to keep his feet carefully under the cloak, and he could only pray he'd managed it all the way to the station's muggle clothing store.

He moved carefully once he reached the store, and passed under the security cameras, mindful of the attention randomly appearing feet would draw from a muggle security guard.

Shoplifting was ridiculously easy for the invisible, Harry noted, as he carefully moved a pair of muggle slacks under his cloak while the attendant wasn't looking. The security cameras were sure to have some wildly odd data, but Harry would be long gone by the time anyone noticed. Once he'd left, he was in a metro bus in less than a minute.

He saw a flaw in his plans as soon as he reached the metro platform, and cursed himself, but there wasn't much he could do. There was a crowd of muggles waiting with him, which he'd somehow have to dodge to get into the metro bus invisible. Harry was still trying to figure out how he'd manage that when he saw the metro bus arrive and watched Muggles poured out of every door. He managed to slip into the back, where there were fewer people moving in or out, and stepped over people's feet as he worked his way into a corner with a backpack and a full set of clothing in his arms.

Again he found himself cursing his idiocy. He'd obviously spent too much time living with wizards, when he hadn't remembered that the crowd of people loading in behind him would gather in front of the door and give him no way to exit without bodily pushing them all aside. And surely even more muggles would join the crowd at the next metro station. Harry stared at the mass of muggle bodies in front of him, silently repeating his motionless anti-searching spell 'perdamitto' to himself in a desperate attempt not to panic.

The next metro stop added to his nightmare, as the entering crowd slowly herded the businessman in front of him backwards and further into Harry's corner. Harry noticed the problem, but was entirely unable to do anything about it, despite the magical options that popped into his brain. He had to keep his mind focused on the anti-searching spell and almost nothing else. At the next metro stop the man tried to take his last step back into the corner and both stepped on Harry's foot and elbowed him in the chest accidentally. Harry held his breath, waiting for the muggle to make a scene.

"Excuse me." The man muttered quietly, stepping forward and continuing to stare at the metro door.

Harry blinked, thinking at first that the man was a wizard and perfectly aware that there was someone behind him. Then he realized the man was just too used to metros, too acclimated to

staring at nothing and noticing no-one. The muggle businessman had probably bumped into people hundreds of times before; so often that he didn't even notice that the person in question didn't seem to exist.

Damn, this is stressful.

Harry's heart was pounding at him by the time the metro had cleared enough for him to leave without touching anyone. Doubly careful to keep his cloak down and his spell up, Harry jogged through the crowd to a random bathroom.

He was disgusted by his next plan, but he hadn't thought of anything better despite a week of brain-storming. He flushed the toilet twice, and poured his entire bottle of clothing bleach into the presumably-filthy water bowl. Kneeling on the floor and holding his breath, Harry carefully dunked his black hair into the noxious chemical.

Oh shit it stings. Harry thought, though he was careful to keep his entire scalp in the water.

He remembered his eyebrows too, and carefully scooped up palmfuls of the chemical to bathe over his face.

He flushed the toilet as often as he could without drawing attention to his stall, and dunked his head and face again in the 'clean' water.

Damn that hurt.

Harry used his shirt to dry his hair, and changed into the stolen clothing. There were 'permanent' shoplift-protection tags to be taken off, but they weren't anywhere obvious. He'd been careful about that when he'd picked it out.

He stepped out of the bathroom, and examined his now hideously



gray hair. It was definitely gray, but lay flat and damaged against his scalp. He blessed the summer's practice that kept his face neutral as he took in the strange new look, and drew his fingers through drying hair. He had done his best to dress himself like a rich prat, with a white polo over expensive black slacks and dress shoes. Harry knew that his gray hair could draw people's attention to him, and hoped the clothing would at least keep anyone from associating what they saw with Harry Potter.

Harry walked calmly from the bathroom, his invisibility cloak, study cards, and wizarding dress robes shoved into a bland-looking shoulder bag he'd stolen. His backpack, now filled with his clothing and the empty bleach bottle, was too big to fit in the bathroom trashcans so he left it under the sink like he'd forgotten it, and prayed that no one arrested him thinking he'd planted a bomb. Harry forced himself to keep a confident but slow stride, even though his instincts screamed at him to sprint through the station.

Now more than ever, he had to move quickly, but first he had to find out where he was in the metro grid, after taking two metros at random. Harry found his route to a small metro stop on Charing Cross road, and threw out his backpack in an out of the way trashcan on the way to the platform.

Harry stepped out of Leicester Square metro station onto Charing Cross road, and forced himself to walk calmly up to the Leaky Caldron. It was the exact place where Fudge had found him the first time he'd run away, but Harry didn't know of any other entrance to the wizarding world. His hope was that he'd lost the Ministry and Order officials fast enough that they wouldn't know to look for him at the Leaky Caldron yet. He knew their first instinct would be to blame his disappearance on the Death Eaters, and would need time to regroup and realize that he hadn't been abducted but had left intentionally, and would therefore need to cross through brick wall behind the bar.

Harry forced himself not to hold his breath as he found the small door

between the large muggle book shop and the record store. Harry patted his gray hair down over his scar and strengthened his blank expression, before stepping confidently into the pub.

It was extremely anticlimactic. Tom barely even looked up from his bar as Harry walked through. Harry kept his face blank and reached the grassy clearing behind the pub alone. Then he had to worry again. He knew that opening the archway was a benign magical process, like being able to see the Leaky Caldron around the anti-muggle wards, the ministry couldn't track it, but still, he worried about the wards around his wand as he tapped out the pattern on the brick above the trashcan as he'd learned from Hagrid on his first trip to the Wizarding World. He didn't know how to work it wandlessly, and he didn't want to risk the time to puzzle it out. That could very well take hours.

Fudge was not on the other side of the wall either. Harry almost smiled he was so relieved. He walked quietly to the changing area, a set place for wizards to change between muggle and wizarding garb. Usually wizards would just use a spell, but the changing area was always packed with underage wizards who needed to cross between their world and muggle London. Harry stored his muggle clothing in his shoulder bag, and strode into Diagon Alley, looking for all intents and purposes like a strikingly white-haired pureblood in formal robes. Almost look like a Malfoy, really. Harry noted, as he picked his way down towards Gringotts Bank.

The bank looked smaller than usual to Harry. It was still a huge marble building stretching far above and below any of the nearby shops, but it wasn't larger than life like when he was a first year. He knew the magic that allowed the huge interior room to fit into the smaller exterior walls, and had a few guesses as to how the impossibly long tunnels were created. That made the building seem smaller somehow, though Harry still found himself in awe of it as he entered through the stone doors. The spells the construction required were extraordinary, and Harry suspected there were dozens

of charms around the building that he'd still never even heard of.

The long-fingered goblins were at work as always on high stools behind the long counter. Harry stepped quickly up to the same counter Hagrid had used in Harry's first visit to the bank. He could see over the counter easily now, Harry noted with surprise.

"Good morning" Harry greeted. The same goblin as always looked up from across the counter and put his long feather down.

"I'd like to make a withdrawal from my vault, please" Harry requested, placing his key halfway over the counter. The goblin nodded sagely and picked up the key to inspect it carefully.

"Everything seems to be in order, Mr. Potter. I will have someone to take you down to your vault." He replied slowly, apparently recognizing Harry from his key, rather than his scar, for Harry's gray hair easily covered the distinguishing mark .

"Crankbait" The goblin called slightly as he handed Harry's key to a waiting attendant behind the counter.

Crankbait led Harry down a different door from the last time Harry had visited his vault. Every visit they entered the cavern down a different cart track, Harry recognized. At the moment though, Harry couldn't interest himself in it. The further down the tracks brought him beneath London, the more trapped he felt.

If the goblin were to betray him, Harry realized, he simply did not yet have the magical skills to get himself back to the surface. With a simple wrong turn, the goblin could manage what the Dark Lord had yet to.

I should have thought more before getting into this cart Harry thought too late, as he plunged down the tracks. He should have discussed possibilities of having his gold brought up to him, rather than be sent

careening into the depths of the earth. Surely Bellatrix Lestrange did not subject herself to the cart's infernal speed or the cold of being miles underground.

The cart stopped as always in front of his vault, and Crankbait carefully opened the vault door with its key. The vault opened, and galleons poured out over Harry's feet. The vault was literally filled to the top, and it seemed far more organized than usual, like someone had had to carefully pile the galleons to get them to fit at all.

"Do galleons...er...breed?" Harry asked.

Aaand could I sound more like an idiot?

"I mean, do I gain interest or something?" Harry asked.

"This is a bank, sir." The goblin mentioned, as if randomly.

Feeling a fool, Harry took a small bag the goblin handed him, and collected the gold off the floor.

"Might I suggest a high-security vault, sir?" The goblin mentioned blandly.

"Later, sir, thank you." Harry noted. He'd entirely forgotten that the Black vaults' contents had all been entrusted to him. He'd already had a sick amount of money, but as Harry stared at the large vault piled high with gold he realized that he'd probably never have to worry about money again, for anything.

It would be damn ironic if the power to vanquish the Dark Lord was the pooled galleons of two large Gringotts vaults. Illegal stuff is supposed to be expensive and I must have hundreds of thousands of galleon coins in here, if I get jumped, carrying too much money is hardly my largest problem, I should take whatever I can carry.

"Do you have a quick method for counting out a thousand galleons, sir?" Harry asked the goblin once he'd finished filling up his personal bag of gold. The goblin didn't even blink at the huge amount.

"If I may, sir?" Asked the goblin, gesturing to Harry's vault. Harry nodded in permission, and the goblin reached in., and picked up a single coin. Harry took it, thinking the goblin was playing some kind of joke, but he noticed the difference in the coin immediately. This one was heavy. Harry turned it around in his hand until he found the letters written on it, 1000 Galleons. Harry gaped at the little coin, which he only now realized was a touch larger than the galleons he was used to, and the huge pile of galleons in his vault. Large galleons in his vault. He had millions of pounds worth of wizarding money, Harry realized. Harry suspected he was going to be using a lot of it before the war was done.

Who cares if war is expensive, I can afford it, and I've said before that I'd give my fortune away to have Sirius back. Harry thought, throwing his tiny bag of 'little galleons' back into his vault vault and gaping at the thousand galleon and what looks like ten-thousand galleon coins piled into his vault.

Looks like I can carry a shitload more money than I thought. Good, money is power and I can't come back.

"Do you have a good way of counting out ten thousand galleons, sir? I mean, in the little coins, not the bigger ones." Harry asked the goblin.

"If I may, sir?" The goblin repeated, gesturing to a pile of leather bags inside the vault that Harry hadn't even noticed. Harry stretched an arm into his vault and grabbed a bag to pass to the goblin. By the time Harry had fully turned back around, the goblin was handing the bag back, full of galleons.

The goblins can summon objects from inside Gringotts, Harry noticed

uncomfortably. And do wandless magic! Harry realized, searching the goblin for any trace of a wand.

Effective wandless magic, Harry thought bitterly, wishing he could cast one of the actually reliable anti-searching spells that he knew about, rather than the first-year level one he was struggling to concentrate on. There was no way he'd be able to summon something as heavy as a galleon, forget ten thousand of them.

Harry glanced inside the leather pouch to see a small pile of gold coins.

"Wow, ten thousand doesn't look like much." Harry noticed aloud, wondering if he should withdraw more.

"The bag is spelled, sir." The goblin answered, without a condescending note in his voice.

Succinct. Harry thought, liking the trait.

"Shouldn't this much gold be heavy?" Harry asked, curious at how he was even able to lift ten thousand of the coins.

"The bag is spelled, sir." The goblin repeated, making Harry feel even more the fool. Harry nodded quietly, struggling to not blush, pay attention, and concentrate on his wandless magic all at once.

"Oh. Can you get me two more ten thousands?" Harry asked, dumping the uncounted coins back into his vault and handing the goblin another bag from his vault. Crankbait complied quickly.

Definitely didn't use a wand.

"All finished sir?" The goblin asked as Harry stepped away from his vault to push his three Gringotts bags into the bottom of his shoulder bag. Harry nodded when he was done, and the goblin brought them

careening back towards the surface.

Harry stepped out of the caverns feeling like he'd dodged a killing curse. He hated that he was still so foolish, and getting into a cart alone with a creature he wasn't necessarily able to trust had been a stupid decision. He hadn't even really thought about it. Harry was starting to understand why Mad-Eye had always reminded the Order about constant vigilance; it was simply so easy to forget.

Harry headed first to the exchange desk where he'd seen Hermione's parents exchanging pounds to galleons in their second year. He waited his turn in line and passed the goblin one of his three bags, asking for half of it in muggle. Harry hardly knew what to do with himself when the goblin handed him back fifteen thousand pounds and a significantly lighter bag. Harry thanked the goblin as if handling the large amounts of money was a normal practice for him, and returned the converted money to the bottom of his shoulder bag, deciding to go mental about the massive amounts of money he owned after the war was done and he had time to panic about such things.

For some reason Harry felt far safer in Diagon Alley with the slight weight of his gold pulling on his shoulder. It was good to know he could afford a room in any of the inns he passed, if he required a place to sleep or hide, though he was smarter than to try and hide on Diagon Alley. He wanted to stay in hiding for the rest of the summer, and knew that it was going to be more complicated than renting a flat above Gladrag's Wizard Ware.

Harry forced his mind back onto his current plan. He found Knockturn Alley easily; it was only a turn away from Gringotts. He knew not to dawdle outside of it like a child waiting for someone to lead him through the dingy streets, the way he had the first time when he'd so quickly wandered into the bad side of wizarding London.

This time, he pushed his focus into his Occlumency, and strode down

Knockturn alley like there'd be hell to pay if anyone got in his way.

Harry found Knockturn alley to be almost as anticlimactic as the Leaky Cauldron had been. The more Harry saw of the notorious alleyway the more it seemed like any of the other shady parts of London. He made sure not to bother anyone and to keep his eyes to himself, and the crowd around him did him the same courtesy.

Harry found Borgin and Burkes without trouble. He remembered the store from his floo accident in second year. Even at twelve years old he'd understood that the store sold illegal goods, though he hadn't known known the term 'black market' then. He'd never have thought that only three years later he would be returning as a costumer.

Harry figured his best hope to avoid getting cheated was to avoid talking with the man more than strictly necessary. He hoped that fear of the unknown would keep the man in line, that if the man had no idea what type of wizard he was dealing with, he would deal fairly.

Harry pulled one of the leather bags of gold into his hand as he strode into the store. As confidently as he could, he planted the gold on the grimy counter-top in front of an oily-looking man. Harry hoped the distinct jingling of shifting coins would negate the need for any further conversations. The dealer ran his wand down the side of the spelled bag, and nodded slightly to Harry, apparently unfazed by the large amount of money.

"Get me five wands, and books." Harry ordered, wishing that his voice were deeper.

"Any particulars, sir?" The dealer replied.

"Unlicensed and untraceable, and for the books, the best for what I've paid you. Don't try to screw me." Harry answered, having already decided that he had no way of requesting specific books or wands without it being extremely obvious that he didn't know what he was



talking about.

"If you want them to take, I can give you what you need now. If you give me more time, a week at most, I can perhaps please you further." The salesman replied. Harry was pleased; he'd had no way to be certain that the man was selling illegal items until he'd agreed to the unlicensed wands.

Harry considered the salesman's offer for a second, and recognized that he was probably not advanced enough to understand the books the man would hand him.

"Give me the wands now, take awhile for the books." Harry responded, his voice steady. He wondered for a second why he wasn't afraid of the store the way he'd once been, but dismissed the thought. It was the same reason why he wasn't scared of running away from the wards with the Dursleys. It had to be done, so he would do it, and that's all there was to the matter. He realized belatedly that he'd been smart not to give the man a time frame for when he'd be back. He had no idea when he'd be able to get out to Knockturn Alley again, and somehow it felt like a good idea not to give Mr. Borgin any more specifics than necessary.

It was only luck that I didn't. Damn, damn, damn, I don't know how to do any of this. For all I know I should have come in here dressed in a fucking tutu, and I didn't so he's seconds from killing me.

Mr. Borgin disappeared into the back of his shop. He returned quickly and handed Harry what looked like a simple silk napkin folded in half.

Harry unfolded the silk on the counter top to find five wands of different styles. Apparently his money was enough to pay for specialized ones, rather than the identical ash and willow wands that wizards could practically buy in bulk. Harry picked one up, and felt his body relaxing instantly. He finally had a weapon in his hand again.

Harry picked one of the more simple silencing spells he'd learned, and cast it around the room. He worried for a second that the spell would fail, and he'd be left looking incompetent, but he saw the blue tinge flash over the windows and doors that told him his magic was properly settled over the room. Harry smothered a sigh of relief. He needed Mr. Borgin to respect him, else he'd never get quality books from the man.

Harry canceled the spell, and took up a different wand. He steadily chose a more difficult silencing spell, casting with each consecutive wand. The last one failed on him. Harry attempted to cast his most advanced silencing spell that would make an image of smoke around the walls of the room, and ended up with a whisp of crackling sparks shooting randomly into the air. At first Harry wanted to run from the room, convinced the dealer could now guess everything, and would know that Harry Potter was standing, out of his league, in his shop, trying to buy illegal wands. But when Harry glanced over and saw Mr. Borgin looking nervous, he settled himself down and realized he had just been tested again, and had just passed.

By luck again. Harry thought, hating how he was only surviving this trip by the skin of his teeth. Hell if the door opened behind him and a breeze blew his gray hair from over his scar he'd be a dead man. Harry didn't want to see what Mr. Borgin would do if he suspected someone was a Ministry official, forget the f-ing Boy Who Lived. Harry glanced at Mr. Borgin, doing his best to look serious and dangerous.

"I don't have a sense of humor, Mr. Borgin. I asked for five wands, not four and a twig from the closest pine tree."

Shite, this wand isn't even made of pine, I'm an idiot, and I'm a fifteen year old trying to threaten a Dark Arts dealer, and that was not as threatening as it could have been, damn it. Harry thought frantically, though he kept his face looking calm. He wasn't even sure if it was

his spell or the wand that had failed, but in either case he had to blame the wand.

I should never have come here.

With that thought Harry became calm again, as he remembered why he'd left the protected muggle home. He needed a wand and he needed books if he was going to study, so he was going to get them.

Harry handed the wand back to Mr. Borgin, and waited. The man stammered something that sounded like a flimsy excuse about a bad assistant, and an apology, and returned to the back.

The dealer came back with another slip of silk. Harry took the wand immediately and cast again.

"*Silentium Alatus*" Harry spoke slowly as he traced a constant double helix in the air, pointing his wand toward each wall in turn. Smoke rose up on the sides of the room, clinging to the walls. Images of dragons swam through the smoke slowly, and disappeared as the casting image faded.

Perfect.

Only then did Harry look at the wand he'd used. It had responded to him almost as well as the one he'd bought from Ollivanders, and was certainly more beautiful. Harry had to suppress an impressed whistle as he examined the wand he'd just used. It's exterior was a strikingly red wood that was swirled with a thick black grain. Harry was careful to give no sign of his specific interest in it, and returned it beside the other four. Keeping his particular wand untraceable was, after all, the reason why he was buying five of them in Knockturn Alley.

"Excellent." Harry replied to the waiting dealer, suspecting that the last wand was of considerable better quality than the rest, to make up for Mr. Borgin's failed test. The man had tried to sell him an

inadequate wand, he had to make up for that now.

"What are their properties?"

"Canadian maple, centaur tail-hair. Sapele mahogany, Merrow hair, Black Walnut, black sphinx hair, Heartwood, Hippogriff heartstring" Mr. Borgin answered, pointing to each wand in turn until he reached the fifth. "This sir, is Brazilian Rosewood with a thestral hair core." The man answered with almost as much pride as Ollivander himself about the rosewood exterior.

"I am pleased with all of them, sir." Harry replied, carefully refolding the silk around his wands.

"I am glad, sir." Mr. Borgin replied, sounding far more respectful after his display of spells.

"I'll return for the books." Harry said and gathered the five wands into his bag.

Harry left the shop still unsure whether or not the man had cheated him on the wands or not, but he wasn't getting pelted with owls about having used underage magic, so Harry figured he didn't care. He took out the rosewood wand on a secluded corner and cast the strongest anti-searching spells he knew around himself.

Harry stared at the four extra wands, wondering what he'd do with them. He'd bought them to make it less obvious to the dealer that he was buying a wand for himself, but now he started thinking about what to do with them. He hated to think about giving them away. No one but an underage wizard casting Dark spells would need an unlicensed wand, and the whole point of fighting was so his friends didn't have to. Harry sighed and returned the wands to his backpack.

He'd keep the wands, and find a use for them if he ever needed to. For now he had to focus his mind on learning what he needed to

know.

Harry wandered down Knockturn Alley until he found a bookshop. A bell rang as he entered, which seemed somehow muggle to Harry, though he knew better than to ask about it. An elderly woman shopkeeper greeted him from behind a desk, and returned to her work. The bookshop was badly-lit, but otherwise looked like any other Harry had been in.

Harry felt the happiest he'd been since the Ministry attack being in the small bookstore. He was proud to see that the front shelves held many of the books he'd already read, it made him feel like he was part of something, though he had only covered the books a few feet from the doorway. He only had to walk a few paces to find bookcases of volumes he hadn't read yet. He'd already mastered the basics in all of the fields he'd wanted, and chose two more specialized books for each of the subjects he was concentrating on--charms, transfigurations, defense and the Dark Arts.

He'd thought Charms was going to be a fairly useless subject, since mostly it dealt with long-term spells like anti-sticking charms and the like, but Charms covered the majority of his protection spells, including the Anti-Searching Spell that he'd used to escape, so Harry grabbed a couple more books from the subject. He was hoping to use the lessons from the book Reliable Locking Charms by C. on his hostel room and to keep prying eyes from his trunk once he was at Hogwarts again. He was thrilled to find the book Protection Spells and How to Cast Them Volume II: Detection and Despelling. He'd stolen the first volume from Hogwarts but the second had been checked out. Harry grabbed it now.

The books on "Dark Arts" as he'd been taught to call them, were actually just books of offensive spells, or "hexes". Some were gruesome, yes, but they were spells like any other, and followed the same theories and methods as "good" magic. There was nothing particularly "Dark" about them, rather than the fact that they were

designed for fighting rather than for running away or hiding. It occurred to Harry that the books were written by experts for people like him, wizards training to be warriors, and felt comforted by the fact that at least some wizards out there were endeavoring to teach him what he needed to know.

Harry was doubly careful to hide his scar before approaching the counter, but realized he hadn't been looked at once since he'd entered the wizarding world. Apparently the formal robes and clothing bleach had done their job well. They served him well here, and Harry thanked the clerk kindly and left with his piles of books tucked into his Gringotts bags. He couldn't even feel their extra weight.

Harry planned to hide out in the muggle world. He figured that even that alone would make him almost impossible to find for the Ministry, and quite possibly for the Order as well. The wizards were used to their own, smaller world. Muggle London was huge, and unfamiliar to the wizarding world, so it made an excellent place to hide without going too far away from the Hogwarts Express.

Before he left for Muggle London, Harry made a last-minute decision to go to the owl-post office. He'd known that Dumbledore would be worried about him the second the Order members reported that they'd lost him, but now he decided to care about that. Yet another bad affect of Dumbledore's mindless following of his emotions- the Order had spent far too much of their manpower trailing after and protecting Harry Potter, and Harry knew that if he didn't report that he was safe, Dumbledore would drag all of his Order members through London to search for him. It was frustrating, but at least Harry had a way to avoid it this time, although it felt terrible reckless to walk into a Ministry-run building on Diagon Alley with only his gray hair to hide him.

The Owlery was bustling with wizards and witches who didn't have their own owls, or wanted their business post-marked, or wanted to

send a letter anonymously. Harry slid in beside them along the counter, and paid for a piece of parchment and the one-way flight of a particularly fast-paced hawk owl.

Harry thought over what he wanted to say before he wrote anything, knowing that he didn't want the letter to be understood by anyone who managed to intercept it. He decided to just be as vague as possible, and leave it to Dumbledore to extrapolate that he'd run away of his own will.

Headmaster, I am safe. I will return on time. Sincerely,  
T.D.L.W.M.H.A.H.E

Harry hoped that Dumbledore would recognize the initials of the prophesy section that Voldemort had never read, the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, and call off whatever reckless rescue mission he'd had the Order members planning. Beyond that, it really wasn't his problem. Harry recast his anti-searching charms while hidden in the bustling crowd, and burrowed his way back outside.

Harry changed back into muggle clothes before he risked walking through the Leaky Caldron again, in an attempt to stay unrecognizable for all those who knew him as the Boy Who Lived. Still, he could hardly breathe until he was safely back in the muggle world.

It was horrid having to walk through the Leaky Caldron after having given the Order so much time to catch up to him, but his second passage was as anti-climatic as the first, and Harry found himself back in a muggle street without catching so much as an interrogating glance.

He knew he had to find a place to sleep, but wanted to get far away from Diagon Alley before he did anything else. He jumped onto a random metro, and changed lines a few times until he knew no one from one metro bus had been in a previous one. He wasn't being

followed. He went into a bathroom again to cast a detection spell for anything cast on him to follow him since he'd left Diagon Alley, and found nothing. He was safe.

Harry stepped out at the next metro stop, reciting spells under his breath as he hurried around looking for a hostel. He found one close by, and pulled a few of his twenty pound notes from his leather bag and shoved them into his pocket. He didn't know much about street smarts but he could avoid flashing a thousand pounds around at the very least.

Harry blew out a quick breath, reminding himself why he was standing in front of a hostel and not returning 'home' to the muggles as he was supposed to do. So much time had passed in four weeks, it didn't seem right that only a month before he'd been inside Dumbledore's office, screaming and tearing apart a room.

If he had thoughts to spare on being emotional, he wasn't concentrating on occluding enough, Harry reminded himself, focusing deeper into his occlumency shields. Once his mind was almost fully occupied, Harry entered the dingy-looking hostel and idly glanced around.

The door opened into a small hallway that led past a staircase in front of him. A counter to Harry's left separated him from a small room where a boy about his age was watching T.V. Harry wondered briefly how to get his attention without embarrassing himself before he remembered that he didn't have time to be shy anymore. Just like that, the awkward feeling was gone.

"Excuse me." Harry called over the counter.

"Oh!" The boy startled, and wandered over. "Sorry about that, was watching Ab Fab, you know what it's like. I see Christopher Ryan and I'm gone." He said, grinning.



"I'd like a private room and a pass for the bathroom once a day please." Harry responded, before returning to his mantra of offensive incantations. It was another of his mind exercises, to practice concentrating on his occlumency and on something else at the same time.

Impedimenta, Locomotor Mortis, Confringo, Viscus Abigere

"Err..course. Cheers. Room 15's empty. Five quid a day, up front." The muggle boy answered hesitantly, apparently not liking something about him now, as he quite visibly put his hand on the bottle of pepper spray hanging at his hip.

Do I seem intimidating somehow? Harry wondered, eyeing the muggle weapon.

I never threatened him. I should be able to talk to people without scaring them if I don't mean to though. I need to work on that.

"Thanks, mate." Harry answered, trying to sound as casual as he could. It sounded rushed.

Oh well.

Harry collected his change, got his keys, and hurried to his room. Only there did he realize that he'd forgotten to go shopping as he'd planned, and only had one pair of clothing now, the slacks and shirt he'd stolen in the train station. Harry decided to get by without. That was what scurgify spells were for.

Harry cast protective spells over his room until he suspected that an H-bomb could land directly over the hostel and leave his room standing perfectly in the pile of rubble. Hopefully the spells were enough to keep the hostel unplottable and the room practically nonexistent, even to the Ministry, Dumbledore, and the Death Eaters trying to find him.

That would certainly complicate everything.

For now, his life was very simple. He had a wand, and work to do. He needed a desk, a chair, and his books, and he wouldn't have to care about anything else for hours.

It felt good to use the magic he'd been struggling to understand for a month. He'd only really gotten a grasp on what Transfigurations were two weeks before, though he was sure McGonagall had explained it multiple times.

There were three main types of transfigurations. Life-Benign transfigurations changed animals or plants into benign things like pincushions or chairs, Benign-Life transfigurations did the opposite, and both were difficult to do, and didn't last long. Animals and plants had too much intrinsic energy to be anything but alive; a couch made from a rabbit would most likely melt by the end of its first day due to the extra energy left in it. A moose made from a couch would die within minutes, simply not having the energy needed to live. Life-Life transfigurations were immensely complicated, as the original and transfigured animal had to have very similar intrinsic energies to be able to live after the transfiguration, and intrinsic energy was a difficult thing to calculate.

"Accio dust." Harry cast, concentrating on his open palm. Within seconds he had a disgusting pile of dust bunnies in his hand. Harry split the pile into two parts and put them on the floor where he wanted his desk and chair.

All Benign-Benign transfigurations had the same incantation words and wand movement; the only way that the spell changing dust into a desk and the one changing a desk into dust differed was by the wizard's concentration. Which is why first-years started learning with changing matches into needles. The larger the change, the harder it was for the wizard to concentrate on what he actually wanted. Which

was why Harry wasn't sure if his magic was about to work or not; he'd never been able to practice any transfiguration without his wand, and he'd never done anything advanced with Benign-Benign transfigurations in McGonagall's class, or if they had, he'd done it badly.

"Mutare" Harry cast, and rejoiced at the sturdy table that seemingly emerged from nowhere in his hostel room. He'd done it easily, while occluding. It made sense, after spending a month learning how to concentrate that he'd be good at it, but he hadn't thought he'd end up with the exact replica of his desk at the Dursleys that he'd been hoping for. He'd never cast an exact transfiguration before. Hermione had, he remembered, but it had taken her three tries. Finally, he could see his magic improving, useful magic, this was more than a card scraping over a desk, this was magic that could protect him, could hold up real protection wards, that could cause pain, and could kill whatever bastards tried to hurt his friends. Would kill the bitch that had killed his godfather.

Something tight in his stomach loosed at the thought, and he breathed a sigh of relief, he was getting somewhere, leaving that child who'd gotten Sirius killed far behind him, he'd never be that impotent fool again. The more he improved himself the more he hated that angry, impotent fool child he used to be, the one he'd swore he'd never be again. It wasn't hard to study all day anymore, there was no excuse for him never having done it before, and he hated who'd he'd been in the past that had never tried to do anything at all. But the further he got from being that angry, that impotent and that foolish, the less he hated who he actually was. Those were all traits he could change, and he was doing so, he was improving, and with that thought, he felt his mourning start to ease.

"Ensis confodio" Harry cast, and watched a thick slit crash its way into the hostel room wall as if a sword had been suddenly battered through the hostel's brick.

Brilliant, Harry thought, seeing the spell's perfect execution. It was only after that he realized he then had a huge sword hole through the hostel wall. He hoped his '101 Spells for the Modern Wizard' book had a section on repairing drywall.

Harry settled into his old routine without trouble. He studied with his books at night when the hostel was sleeping. He spent the day surrounded by silencing spells, casting his hexes and defenses in rapid succession, until the hostel room was in ruins and he had to fix it again before he could restart.

Some spells he still had to practice with a pen, those frustrated him more. The Taranis Thunder spell made a sound that, if he put enough power into it to break eardrums as it was ought, would smash through his silencing spells and send muggles running in every direction. He knew of silencing spells that could handle it, but those were all mixed with Tranfigurations concepts that he hadn't mastered yet, so he was left with his pen copying the wand-movement and saying the words without any magic coming out.

Even without having practiced it "correctly", Harry had no doubt that if he ever needed the spell, he'd perform it perfectly. He'd overestimated the need to practice his magic with a real wand. He executed every one of the spells he'd learned over the summer month with the Dursleys perfectly, on the first try. Magic was about concentration, and he was quickly mastering that.

Still, it was easier to learn magic when he could see his spell's casting image.

A casting image was an intrinsic part of advanced spell-casting. They were designed to let the caster know if the spell was properly cast. The dragon-smoke that had appeared with his last spell in Borgin and Burkes was a casting image.

Harry spent most of his time in the hostel working with his advanced spells. Before, all he'd ever had to do was memorize a spell's incantation and wand movement, and he'd mastered it. Advanced spells required a finesse that had him recasting the same spell for hours at a time, determined to perfect his wand-movement and concentration.

Most advanced spells were tied into their casting image, a technique that strengthened the spell, but made it much more difficult to learn. Instead of simply speaking a spell and concentrating on exactly how to move his wand, he had to speak the incantation words, perform the perfect wand motion, and be concentrating on what he wanted the spell to do.

It was like learning occlumency, when he'd had to split his attention so he could focus on individual drops of water at the same time as feeling an ocean of power around him, but this time he was trying to learn to split his attention and occlude at the same time. He never allowed himself to stop occluding anymore.

Harry knew he wouldn't master the technique before the end of the summer, but he was improving, and that was enough to keep him going.

The better Harry got at studying through his headaches, the faster time slipped away from him. He blinked and the first week of August and the rest of his semi-useful Hogwarts books were finished. He moved on to his Knockturn Alley books with a sigh of relief. These books were interesting, and Harry found himself learning even faster, though he carefully kept to his routine. 3 hours of sleep a night, a half-hour nap at 3:00 PM, 3 meals a day.

The meals were the only thing that got Harry out of the hostel. He went to the food market across the street once every three days.

He studied between bites and clambered through his new books faster than he'd ever predicted. Yet again he'd made a mistake at the bookstore and bought too few. Harry was starting to look forward to Hogwarts, so he could return to the huge library there and never leave. It was the only thing he was looking forward to there.

He knew what the advanced books assumed he'd understand, and it

made him proud to go through the volumes as they became more and more topic-specific without ever needing to doubt his understanding of it.

Except for wandless magic. Harry thought, trying to fall asleep three weeks into his routine. Wandless magic was not coming any easier that it ever had. It felt like there was something in his way, something foolishly easy that he was forgetting to do as he cast, like he'd forgotten to unlock a door before he tried to open it, and was left uselessly tugging on it for hours. He was a wizard, he should be able to do more than float a shoe to the ceiling. That was hardly the power the Dark Lord knew not.

"Damn it." Harry grumbled, turning over in the comfortable bed he'd transfigured from the hostel cot. He was comfortable, but couldn't his mind to shut off. He'd studied all day and felt sick with exhaustion, but his mind was still racing, revolving around what he hadn't done yet.

Wandless magic wasn't even the only thing that he was left struggling with, despite how much he'd come to understand about magic.

He still couldn't understand even the first page of the second Charms book he'd bought in Knockturn Alley, though he'd read the book twice. It sounded like a relatively simple book, Protection Spells and How to Cast Them, Volume Two: Detection and Despelling, by Eden Arlington. Harry glared at the book's title from across the dark room.

The first volume had explained everything from anti-muggle enchantments to the ancient Egyptian booby traps Ron had described years before. It had taught him the dozens of spells he'd layered over the hostel. The second volume, which had been checked out when Harry was stealing from the Hogwarts library, promised to explain how to detect each of the covered spells, and explain the intricate process of dispelling them safely

Instead, the book had slid through magical detection in less than two chapters, without ever making sense to him. "Magical detection" went against some of the main magical principles he'd learned.

So now he found himself with the nightmare he'd been trying to avoid when he'd escaped into London in the first place. He had a week free and no books to learn from but the one he couldn't understand. Harry wanted to scream. He couldn't risk another trip into Diagon Alley, he was too likely to get caught and sent back to the Dursleys, where he'd have an even more useless week in front of him. His best option was to continue working with his useless wandless magic until pure frustration killed him.

Harry worried he would go insane with anger and grief if he wasn't able to improve at anything for a full week. Improving was the only thing that kept him going most of the time. Otherwise he'd fall on his face and sleep for a week. He was so exhausted, but he'd probably wake from that week crying about the time he'd wasted.

Pathetic. Harry called himself, flipping over onto his stomach to bury his face in his pillow.

He knew that the desperate feeling, the need to learn was what was making him stronger, making him improve, but it felt like it was going to kill him some day. It kept growing, he couldn't breathe if his mind wasn't fully engaged pushing to learn something new.

And how twisted is that? If he didn't improve, he wouldn't be able to live with himself, and sometimes that was the only thought that kept him awake and improving. It was improve or lay down and die, and he refused to die if it meant one of his friends would follow him down.

And Harry knew he'd never be able to leave that Charms book alone until he mastered it. Whether or not the book was impossible to understand, he would find a way to make that magic work for him.



"Damn it." Harry said to the wall in front of him, and punched his pillow. He had to sleep. He couldn't learn quickly with anything less than three hours of sleep, he'd already figured that out. That didn't stop his mind from reciting the introduction to the nonsense charms book. Even the introduction spoke nonsense, Harry couldn't get to the second sentence without being confused.

When you detect a spell, you will get a feeling for the magic. This occurs because your magical energy is reacting with the energy of the placed spell. Magical energies react differently to different types of spells, and with practice you should be able to detect if a casting is a charm, hex, or transfiguration, and even what the casting's magical reaction is spelled to be, in other words, what the spell is designed to do, and in time, what the spell is. This book will guide you to master each step in turn of one of the most useful, and potentially life-saving magical techniques known to wizardry.

It didn't make sense that his magical energy could react to anything unless he'd cast a spell on the exact area where the booby-trap was. If his magical energy wasn't outside of his body, thanks to a spell, then it couldn't react to anything. It was impossible, or it least it was according to the magical theory he'd learned.

I'll think of a solution in the morning, damn it. How is it I can control every bit of my schedule until I want to drop asleep where I stand all the time, and yet when I get in bed I can't get my bloody mind to shut up and leave me alone about how every wizard should be wandering around the streets with his "magical energy reacting to the energy of the placed spell" fucking everywhere. If you don't have to cast a spell, or concentrate on it, it should happen all the time.

Harry almost sat up in bed with surprise, finally he'd thought of something new with the Charms book. Then it hit him, and he fell back into bed with a groan.

Great, I waste four hours rereading most of the book and stay up at

night stressing about it, so I can think of another way it doesn't make any sense, Harry thought with a grimace. It was true, according to the damned Charms book, all wizards should be detecting magic everywhere they went, all the time, even as children.

Harry had already learned that wizards had magical energy in their systems from birth, nothing could take it from them. Every wizard had it, and had the same amount of it. There was no such thing as a more or less powerful wizard, just a more concentrated one, at least according to the more Ministry-minded texts.

So according to the book, to detect magic he had to feel his magic react to the booby trap spell he was trying to detect, and then he could determine what kind of magic it was by how it 'felt'. But if he always had his magic with him, and all wizards did, so wizards be able to 'feel' magic wherever they went in the Wizarding World.

And of course that wasn't true, so yet again he'd proven that the book didn't make any sense. The book treated the subject like it was perfectly normal, it had barely glanced at how to detect magic before it was on about how different magics 'felt'. Eden Anderling was five steps ahead of him by the second chapter. He couldn't feel magic, so the rest of the book was useless to him.

Harry groaned, and felt a strange emotion bubble up in his stomach. He wanted to cry. He wouldn't be worth anything as a weapon against Voldemort if he couldn't get this. He had to be able to detect the malicious spells around him, or he wouldn't be able to walk into a room without setting off every trap left for him. He'd die in one of the booby-traps he'd learned to cast, and he couldn't die yet, he had to kill Voldemort. Even if he ran out of every other reason to live, Harry knew he'd always have that. Voldemort was killing people in his desperate attempt to live, so Harry couldn't give up until he finished him.

Funny that Voldemort would be the one killing to live, and me the one

living to kill. Damn it.

Harry twisted himself around punched the wall behind his bed, allowing the pain to cut all of his thoughts off. He flopped back down onto his pillow and focused on the bruise building over his knuckles until he'd calmed down.

Alright, come on, start from the beginning. To detect magic, I have to let my own magic react to the booby trap's magic, and then feel what that's like. That would make sense, except that I can't feel magic at all, and most wizards aren't walking down Diagon Alley feeling every spell on the street. But obviously Anderling could, he wrote this damn book about it, and it's common enough that he didn't bother explaining it at all. It's not like parseltongue, cause the book is trying to teach wizards how to do this, and magical born abilities don't take any training. So it can be learned, and I know there are no powerful wizards, just more concentrated ones, so I should be able to do this too. I will do this. Damn it come on, I don't get this at all, I can't even feel my own magic, how am I supposed to feel it's reaction to anything?

"Concentration." Harry answered his thoughts aloud, staring open-eyed at the ceiling.

Everything with magic is just concentration, that's all I've ever had to learn to do it. This should follow the same pattern. If I concentrate enough, I can manage this. That's why wizards aren't wandering around doing this all the time.

Harry sat up in bed, deciding to take his shower and buy the next weeks' worth of food before he started, before he remembered that he hadn't slept yet. He had to follow his routine, he needed his three hours of sleep. He turned on the light and wrote down what he wanted to remember in the morning, and fell back into his bed, asleep in seconds.

Harry woke up the next day with more energy than he'd felt in weeks. He was excited. He raced through his morning routine, rushing as always, but he didn't feel seconds from death now. He showered, scourgified his now-ragged pair of clothing, dressed, and left his room at a trot, locking his room with a wave of his hand. Simple anti-muggle spells he could trust to his wandless magic. It wasn't much, but it saved a little bit of time.

Harry nodded to the teenage boy guarding the hostel register as he left. He was careful to wave at the landlady or that teenager whenever he saw them, in the hope that they wouldn't report him to the police as a drug addict or something for staying in his room all day and night and never talking to anyone.

Harry ran across the street and into 'his' grocery store. It badly lit and badly organized, but Harry didn't care, he knew where to find the things he needed.

"6 quid, 98 pence." The teller called to Harry with a grin as he entered.

Harry had come there seven times, and had always bought three loaves of bread and a bottle of instant coffee mix. Apparently the teller had caught the pattern.

This time Harry grabbed a trolley and filled it with bread and coffee mix, knowing he'd attract the teller's attention but not caring. He was leaving London at the end of the week, it wasn't as dangerous to attract attention now, and Harry didn't want to have to break his focus for food anymore. He already knew that once he began studying he wasn't going to get up until he mastered the entire Charms book. He understood, now all he had to do was learn, and he was getting good at that.

"Saving for a flood this time?" The teller asked, glancing down at the trolley of food Harry pushed towards him.

"No." Harry answered quietly, setting his money on the counter.

"Ey, if I give you a bit of advice, would you think about it without giving me the two finger salute?" The teller asked as he passed the last bread loaf over the scanner with a regular beep and accepted Harry's cash.

Harry looked at the bill in the teller's hand and knew he wouldn't get his change until he listened to the strange man.

"Go ahead." Harry answered, packing his food into a bag.

"Whatever shite you're on, and I don't care what drug or drink that is, keep it in moderation, mate. It's not doing good things for ya"

"Thanks." Harry answered immediately, looking pointedly to his bill.

"Think about it, you're lookin half dead and worse every time you come here. People have started askin' me if we're catering to zombies. Trust me, it's better to be sober than dead. Perhaps not by much, but hell, better." The teller emphasized.

"Cheers." Harry answered, mimicking the teenager at his hostel. Harry left without his change, it wasn't worth the wait.

Back in his room Harry sat on the floor, read the chapter explaining magical detection one last time, and set the alarms that would tell him to eat, go to the bathroom, and sleep. Harry doubted he'd be getting up for anything else. The book had gone through the detection process too quickly, but Harry planned to meditate, and think about it, and cast spells until he figured it out on his own.

He was finally figuring out magical detection and he only had a week before Hogwarts forced him to spend hours in useless classes that would break up his day and ruin his long blocks of concentration. He

wanted to learn magical detection while he was still away from all that.

Harry stood up from his meditating when his alarm went off. He'd followed his routine perfectly through his last week, though he'd spent his 'study time' on the floor, concentrating on feeling something as he cast spells around his room. Now he was supposed to eat, shower, shave, scourgify his clothing, and get ready to return to Hogwarts.

He'd spent that first day sitting on the floor, slowly calling his stray thoughts back to his magic, until he could almost feel it. It had felt just out of reach, when he'd first noticed it, like a stray memory of someone's name that he could almost feel but couldn't make clear. It had taken him the full day of sitting with his tailbone aching and his head pounding to get any further than that, but he'd managed it.

He was getting somewhere, Harry noted as he ripped open a new (though stale) loaf of bread. He'd spent days practicing with water summoned from the hostel bathroom taps. He held the liquid with a simple Wingardium Leviosa, a spell that required constant concentration, and tried to feel the spell he was performing. He'd had to struggle to keep the water in the air at the same time as trying to get a clear grasp on his magic.

It had taken him that day to realize that he could feel something if he concentrated on his body, rather than his mind, while he held the water up. Something behind his heart and in his bones would respond, would release, almost like a taut muscle loosening. Magic was in his body, he'd found, even though he controlled it with his mind.

Maybe that was why Voldemort needed to share Quirrell's body—otherwise he couldn't do magic at all. Harry thought, biting into two slices of bread at would be why Voldemort had needed Ginny's help too, while he was just a memory in a book. He could

take over a mind, but he'd never been able to truly do magic until he'd been given a body again, his own body again.

Levitating water opened a door for his learning. Once he could feel himself doing it, he finally got a hold on what he was searching for when he looked for his magic. He moved onto harder things to levitate, and within the day, he could keep the hostel room's sparse furniture in the air wandlessly while still feeling his magic.

He'd learned something unexpected by practicing levitating objects; he couldn't wandlessly start a spell that required a wand-motion, but he could maintain it. Once he'd cast "wingardium leviosa" on something, he could hold it up without his wand. He was getting good at it too, he could even cast other spells while levitating the hostel furniture wandlessly, and he'd spent days learning the 'feel' of each spell as he cast it.

It was then that he realized that magic didn't "flow" at all. It wasn't like liquid that would flow to one place or another. It wasn't physical like that. It was like awareness, but tangible, and yet still practically limitless. It was everywhere inside him, inside his bones and blood and skin. It was his life. It didn't make sense in any terms Harry could think of. It was an entire river of force and speed inside him that somehow settled into his body, that felt tranquil and frantic all at once. It wasn't like anything he'd ever felt, or could ever describe, but he managed to feel it.

After that he couldn't not feel his magic, though without concentrating he didn't really notice it. It was like his heart beat, or breathing, that way.

Casting spells was a strange feeling when he was paying attention to his magic. It was like something grabbed onto his heart and pushed that river of force down his arms and through his wand. He could feel it as a tiny amount of it passed through the rosewood, and focused first into a small beam of energy inside the wood, and then further

into a concentrated force inside the thestral hair.

The strength of a spell depended on how much magic was concentrated into that thin line of energy that exited the wand, and that all depended on the wizard's concentration. Wandless magic was exactly the same, he just had to concentrate enough to focus his magic into a powerful force before he released it from his palms, and he could make his spells as strong as his wand could.

It was true that there were no 'more powerful' wizards, only 'more concentrated' ones. Harry noted as he split his focus between a deep concentration on his magic, floating a ball of fire in front of him, and eating his meal. He never felt more than half of the magical force inside him leave his wand, even when he was casting the most powerful spells he knew, and it never 'ran out'. It was just there, nothing could take that away.

Harry started to smile with that thought. It was good, he felt almost safe in his hostel room with protection spells layered around him. Harry forgot that he was halfway through swallowing when he started to smile, and choked.

Oh brilliantly done. Harry thought sarcastically as he coughed.

He was teaching himself to keep a line of thought going along with his split concentration, a skill he would need in order to detect and identify anything he felt his magic reacting to, but it took his attention away from eating.

Still, he'd managed to keep the ball of fire alive in front of him while he coughed, that was something he'd never have been able to do before the summer.

Harry finished his final loaf of bread and threw the packaging paper into the bag of trash he kept by the door to evanesco.



He walked to the bathroom, still thinking about feeling magic, and wondering why it didn't feel like he was casting anything while he was occluding or speaking parseltongue. He'd tried both, Harry remembered as he locked the door behind him with a wave of wandless magic and stripped.

In his distraction he forgot one of his rules: not to look at himself in the mirror. He'd learned not to weeks before, he'd started looking like a zombie way back then, and inevitably wasted a few moments staring in horror, exactly as he did now.

His deepset eyes were so bloodshot they hid his pupils. Harry could barely tear his gaze from that, and when he did his eyes didn't land on any better sight.

He had never gotten over looking scrawny, and while Hogwarts had tempered his half-starved look for awhile, that layer of fat and muscle was gone, though he had no reason to be losing weight. He spent his time sitting down studying and eating, and yet every time he mistakenly looked in the mirror he saw himself looking worse. Harry flicked his eyes over himself, wishing he didn't notice what he did. His face looked gaunt, too thin and too sharp. The skin on his chest was stretched too-thin, like leather pulled too tight over a tanning rack.

His jaw hung loosely as he breathed heavily, as he almost always did now. It was to be expected, he was tired, but it made Harry hate his reflection even more.

The market teller was right, he looked like a zombie, complete with hair tangled with bits of dirt and small dust-bunnies from lying on the floor. His hair was left half gray and half black now that it was growing in, not to mention knotted to the root.

It doesn't matter. I'm a weapon, not a male stripper. No one will care if I look like shit when I take down the Dark Lord.

Still, Harry hesitated to pull his eyes away from the mirror so fast. His appearance was apparently attracting attention.

Harry made his decision as soon as he realized that. He had to go back down Knockturn Alley if he wanted to pick up his books before he returned to Hogwarts, and he couldn't go anywhere in public looking like he did.

"Fusco," Harry cast, running his hands lightly over his scalp until all of his hair was black again.

"Tondere," He cast on his growing stubble.

"Scurgify." Harry ran his wand over his body, wincing. The spell stung like hell, but it was faster than any shower. Harry cleaned his clothing the same way and got dressed again.

Harry ran his fingers through his hair to pull it up into separate locks. A simple plexus spell had it braided out of his way. Harry looked at the mirror again and nodded. The braids weren't tight or well-made, but at least they kept his hair pulled back from his face, and made him look less childish.

But it's better that way, Harry realized. People were more likely to listen to him when he didn't look like a sloppy fifteen year old, and Harry needed people to obey when he told them to stay out of his way. Still it felt strange, his head felt too light, and his scar stood out against his skin like it never had before, now that he had no way to hide it.

Harry pulled himself away from the mirror, and returned to his room to check the clock he'd transfigured above his desk.

He had two hours before the Hogwarts Express would arrive.

The Order was probably planning an invasion of the train-station to look for him. Harry didn't worry about being caught now, the worst the Order could do was yell at him while Dumbledore defended him, but he'd still rather waltz through undetected. It would be a good test for his evading skills. That and it was a point of pride that he'd foiled them once, he wanted to do it again. Especially since he was sure to have a meeting with the Headmaster as soon as he returned to school, and he'd prefer to prove his competence with magic before that conversation.

First though, Harry wanted to get back into Knockturn Alley and get the books he'd bought from Borgin and Burkes. Now that it didn't matter if he got caught or not, Harry itched to get his hands on something useful to read.

Harry picked up his wand and transfigured himself a wig of what looked like clean, normal gray hair. Mr. Borgin wouldn't recognize the dark braids, and he couldn't go into the shop with his scar blaring out his identity.

First though, he wanted to at least try detecting magic again. He'd gotten the first part started, he could feel his own magic, but he'd never been able to feel any of the spells he cast around the room. Harry wanted to give it one last try before he left his study area.

It was September second, he had to go back to Hogwarts, he'd either learned it already, or he'd have to learn it despite the school's distractions.

"Casses letum" Harry cast, feeling himself focus the magic in his body, and recognizing its release as it left the end of his wand. Harry concentrated on the magic flowing inside him as he approached the casting image of a black web settled over the bed. He placed a hand on the bedpost, knowing he'd cast a booby trap that would not hurt his caster, and wondering if perhaps touching magic was the key to feeling it, though he'd tried multiple times before with the protection

spells layered into the hostel room walls. He felt the wood beneath his hand, and he felt his own magic, but nothing more.

"Damn." Harry said succinctly, and released his concentration.

"Pack." Harry cast, pointing his wand around his room. His books and scattered study-cards quickly flew into his leather bag. He'd transfigured his towel, toothbrush, toothpaste, desk, and chair from the considerable amount of lint on the floor, and he returned them to their natural state now—it was a bad idea to leave spells to expire on their own. The tended to collapse in unexpected ways. Harry threw his bag over his shoulder and walked quietly down the hall. The hostel was paid until the end of September, and Harry wanted to get out of the muggle world without being noticed.

Harry cast anti-searching spells over himself before he left, along with half dozen other spells to keep him safe through the muggle and wizarding worlds. He'd cast them every time he left the hostel walls. He was beginning to feel like Moody, with the 'constant vigilance' mantra going through his head all the time.

Except I'm not half insane from getting locked in a storage trunk for ten months. There's always that.

Harry stepped out onto the street, and made his way back to the metro. It was strange, walking past the food market and getting away from that hostel for the first time in a month. Harry wondered if released prisoners felt the same, while they walked away, just waiting for someone to yell out to them and demand they get back in their place.

This time he wished he was invisible in the metro car. Women tugged their children close as soon as he entered through the sliding doors and businessmen eyed him warily. Harry ignored them, though he was grateful for the reminder that his clothing called unwanted attention to him.

He had one more chore before he could enter the magical world. He'd been wearing a single outfit for a month now. The anti-theft tags had broken and spilled black ink down his shirt and in a front pocket of his pants. His shirt was worn to threads despite being only a month old. It was disgusting, and he'd have no hope to win any respect like that.

Harry left at the next metro stop, feeling a fool for not remembering how muggle clothing could be seen beneath most wizarding robes. He looked around for a clothing store, and was relieved to find one waiting for him across the street.

He blessed his luck and rushed towards it. He hated wasting time. It helped that he was still busying his mind trying to feel his occlumency shields for once, but no matter how much he concentrated on his occlumency, he never felt that release that was a cast spell.

Harry glanced inside the store, determined that it was selling men's clothing, and entered.

Harry entered, hoping the store assistant would be willing to help him find fitting clothing quickly. It was a relatively small place, and obviously privately-owned, but Harry didn't care, as long as the man sitting at the front counter was willing to help him out. Harry needed an entire wardrobe. It was time he replaced Dudley's hand-me-downs with his own clothing.

"Excuse me, sir?" Harry greeted the clerk. The man looked up from filling out a sodoku, and grinned at him.

"Psh, I'm no 'sir'. Call me Jamie. How can I help you?" The man responded, looking thrilled.

"Er..well." Harry cursed his awkward beginning and reminded himself that his childhood was over, he didn't have time to fumble around

anymore. Just like in the hostel, that simple thought was enough to leave him calm and collected.

"I need new clothing, but I only have about a half-hour before I absolutely have to leave. I don't really care what clothing I leave with, but would you be willing to help me find it?" Harry asked, as truthfully as he could without admitting that he was busy studying magic so he could go and take out an evil wizard like a prophecy told him to. He came out sounding a bit young, but Harry figured that was best. He would need to know how to sound like a teenager sometimes, and he was sick of pretending to be someone to be frightened of.

"Sure, how much clothing are you looking for?" The man asked, putting the sudoku he was working on beneath the counter.

"A whole wardrobe." Harry answered, with a wince.

"Damn, a runaway, huh? I'm sorry, honey." The man responded softly, walking around from behind the counter.

"How did you know that?" Harry blurted before thinking.

Shite, well there goes lying about it. Damn it, I've still got no idea how to do this.

"Oh no worries, I'm no stalker freak. We just get a lot of runaways here is all. I left when I was 18, right after secondary school. We're all better off with people who loved us for who we are rather than parents who decide love only extends so far." The man answered, before brightening.

"On the bright side though, shopping for a new wardrobe all at once is really how to go. What size are you?"

"Er..no idea." Harry answered, grateful that he didn't have to pretend to be anyone intense or dangerous around the muggle.

"Eh, I'll guestimate and see what fits you. I've learned not to trust measuring tape; it always lies. What kind of clothing do you like?" Jamie asked, tactfully not looking at Harry's ink-stained outfit.

Harry glanced around at some of the more attention-grabbing outfits in the store. His eyes caught on a manican wearing tight leather pants and a light blue shirt.

"Earth tones." Harry declared, desperately looking around the store for clothing that wouldn't scandalize the wizarding world. He wanted clothing that would help him blend in, something that would allow him to walk down any wizarding or muggle street in London without drawing attention to himself.

So I can kill someone without being caught. Harry added, hating how his mission affected every decision he made. He couldn't change his hair or buy clothing without thinking about politics and power.

No wonder Dumbledore tried to shelter me from this by shoving me in with the Dursleys like a muggle child. I'm supposed to be a teenager, buying leather pants and pink shirts to experiment with, instead of earth tones because they'd allow even a murderer to blend in and out of a crowd.

Harry pivoted awkwardly, watching Jamie go through the racks, gathering clothing as he went. At one point the muggle salesman held up a few bleached shirts over Harry's chest, and shook his head avidly.

"Hmm, no no no. You don't have the complexion for white clothing. You're right, you're right, stick to earth tones." He called as he returned the shirts to their racks.

This man is odd, somehow. Harry decided, though he didn't think the muggle was any danger to him, so he returned to his thoughts on

magic.

"My Angel is always telling me, I've gotta broaden my horizons, there's more to clothing than pink, white and leather, so this is good practice, really."

Pink, white, and leather? Harry thought, before remembering his mantra, if he had thoughts to spare on unimportant tangents, he wasn't concentrating on occluding enough.

Jamie waved him into the stall with an armful of clothing. Harry rushed into each outfit, checking that everything fit comfortably and looked respectable.

Jamie whistled as he left the stall.

"Got it in one, go me." The salesman said with a smile.

Harry bought it all, preferring to buy too much than spend any more time in the muggle clothing store. He had a respectable wardrobe of high quality clothing in normal colors, as he'd asked, now he had to get to Diagon Alley and get himself some fitting robes. At least magic would speed up that process. Harry thanked Jamie, gave him a huge tip, changed into a new muggle outfit, and rushed back into the London street.

Harry ran through the metro station, dodging muggles and trolleys as he went until he was finally deposited outside the Leaky Caldron. Only then did he slow, remembering the anti-muggle wards that kept the nonwizarding crowd passing by unawares.

That ward would be the first spell he encountered since he'd learned to feel his own magic. He'd been around his own spells before, but it made sense that his magic wouldn't react with spells he'd cast himself. According to the Anderling book, he should be able to feel 'foreign' magic first, and in time he'd be able to feel even his own



spells and wards.

Harry approached the Leaky Caldron, slowly pulling more and more of his focus into his magic, until he could almost feel it thrumming inside his blood.

Harry touched the doorknob to the Leaky Caldron and almost yelled with surprise as he jerked his hand away from the door.

At first he'd thought the metal doorknob had painfully burned his hand, until he realized what he was feeling.

Then it just felt like his magic, reacting to the pub's wards, and it wasn't painful at all, just intense. He'd felt the spells on the door, over the whole wall, until he'd jumped away from it. Harry almost grinned at the thought, and quickly smothered the reaction, remembering that to the muggles nearby he'd seemingly be beaming at a blank wall.

Harry hesitated for another second, before leaning forward to clasp the doorknob and feel the building's wards. The magic felt..slippery. It wasn't unpleasant, as it could have been, because he wasn't actually touching anything to feel disgusted by. It was there, and slippery.

Again Harry had to remind himself where he was, though now he worried about the wizards nearby, watching him grab onto the Leaky Caldron's door and not let go. As much as he wished to stay there for hours, studying the magic, he couldn't afford to draw attention to himself. Especially in the place where Order members were most likely to be looking for him.

Harry forced himself to pull open the door and release it, even though he hated the feeling of losing that magical sense. As soon as he released the door behind him, he was alone feeling his own magic and nothing else. He had no idea if there was a magical booby trap just a step in front of him or not. It was like he'd stopped being able to smell or feel, even though he'd only been able to detect magic for a

second.

Harry wanted to plunge himself back into the Arlington book, and into a library of other sources, to teach himself how to feel the magic around him constantly. He hadn't even realized how vulnerable he was without magical detection, and he could barely stand the thought. He'd been studying for months to stop being so damn vulnerable, and now he only felt more exposed than he ever had. Not for the first time Harry wished himself back in the Hogwarts library. It was one of the only reasons he was returning to the school at all.

Harry walked easily through the anticlimactic Leaky Cauldron, and into the chilly little courtyard at the back where the dustbins stood, trying to hide how stressed the small pub made him. He used his rosewood wand to pass through the entrance and paused on the other side, looking around.

Diagon Alley had changed. The colorful, glittering window displays of spellbooks, potion ingredients, and cauldrons were lost to view, hidden behind the large Ministry of Magic posters that had been pasted over them. Many of the posters bore moving black-and-white photographs of Death Eaters known to be on the loose. Bellatrix Lestranger was sneering from the front of the nearest apothecary. A few windows were boarded up, including those of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlor, Harry noted with a grimace. On the other side of the street a number of shabby-looking stalls had sprung up. Harry approached the nearest Ministry poster and read:

-----ISSUED ON BAHALF OF-----

The Ministry of Magic

PROTECTING YOUR HOME AND FAMILY

AGAINST DARK FORCES

The Wizarding community is currently under threat from an organization calling itself the Death Eaters. Observing the following simple security guidelines will help protect you, your family, and your home from attack.

You are advised not to leave the house alone.

Particular care should be taken during the hours of darkness. Wherever possible, arrange to complete journeys before night has fallen.

Review the security arrangements around your house, making sure that all family members are aware of emergency measures such as Shield and Disillusionment Charms, and in the case of underage family members, Side-Along-Apparation.

Agree on security questions with close friends and family so as to detect Death Eaters masquerading as others by use of the Polyjuice Potion

Should you feel that a family member, colleague, friend, or neighbor is acting in a strange manner, contact the Magical Law Enforcement Squad at once. They may have been put under the Imperius Curse.

Should the Dark Mark appear over any dwelling place or other building, DO NOT ENTER, but contact the Auror office IMMEDIATELY.

Unconfirmed sightings suggest that the Death Eater may now be using Inferi. Any sighting of an Inferius, or encounter with the same, should be reported to the Auror office IMMEDIATELY.

So the Ministry has finally figured it out. Harry thought, glancing over the Ministry's poster and wondering how effective any of it would be. Like after every summer, he had no idea what was going on in the Wizarding world.

He'd never thought that would be part of his 'duty'. It was though, Harry realized. If he was going to fight the Dark Lord, he had to know how the Dark Lord was fighting him.

Harry bought three newspapers from a witch's stand nearby, barely glancing down at them before he was looking for a place to get new clothing.

Harry rushed over to the changing area and slipped on his fanciest robes. They were huge on his slim frame, and billowed around his chest and arms, though they stopped two inches short of his wrists and ankles.

Harry hated the loss of time, but knew he'd have to get new robes. He couldn't walk into Borgin and Burkes looking poor, it would make everything harder for him, even picking up the books he'd requested.

Harry entered Madam Malkin's shop. It appeared, at first glance, to be empty, but he heard a familiar voice issuing from behind a rack of dress robes as soon as the door swung shut behind him.

"Oh you could leave it unhemmed, I wouldn't mind. I would grow into my robes eventually, I always seem to."

There was a clucking noise and a voice Harry recognized as Madam Malkin said, "Now, dear, I can hardly let you leave my shop in ill-fitting robes."

Harry walked around the clothes rack and saw Luna Lovegood standing on a stool, wearing a set of light blue robes that glittered with pins around the hem and edges of the sleeves.

"Oh hello, Harry." Luna said, apparently not noticing that Harry's natural black hair was now a blotched gray.

Madam Malkin came out from behind another clothes rack holding a tape measure and a wand.

"Hello dear, are you new? I'll be able to help you in a minute." Madam Malkin said with barely more than a friendly glance at him. She evidently didn't recognize him as easily as Luna, Harry noticed with relief.

"Thanks." Harry responded casually, and took a seat by the door. He didn't want Luna to try and start a conversation with him. He got out one of his newspapers, and began to read.

Harry Potter: The Chosen One?

Rumors continue to fly about the mysterious recent disturbance at the Ministry of Magic, during which He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was sighted once more.

"We're not allowed to talk about it, don't ask me anything." said one agitated Obliviator, who refused to give his name as he left the Ministry last night.

Nevertheless, highly placed sources within the Ministry have confirmed that the disturbance centered on the fabled Hall of Prophecy.

Though Ministry spokeswizards have hitherto refused even to confirm the existence of such a place, a growing number of the Wizarding community believe that the Death Eaters now serving sentences in Azkaban for trespass and attempted theft were attempting to steal the prophecy. The nature of that prophecy is unknown, though speculation is rife that it concerns Harry Potter, who is known to have been at the Ministry on the night in question. Some are going to far as to believe that the prophecy names him as the only one who will be able to rid us of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

The current whereabouts of the prophecy, if it exists, are unknown, although (ctd. Page 2, column 5)

Harry looked through the rest of the paper to find something helpful to read but could only find information like the prices for dragon hide and the newest legislation for standard caldron-bottom thickness. The only sobering piece was the obituary at the back, which was half again as long as it usually was. Florean Fortescue was dead.

That would be why the parlor was boarded up. Harry thought.

He checked the date and found it was months old. It took a simple check to find out that all of his newspapers were. That would teach him not to buy things from those shabby stalls set up on the side of the road, especially when he looked like a tricked-out druggie that wouldn't know any better. Harry suddenly wondered how many galleons he'd given the witch for the stall's newspapers. He couldn't remember at all. Either way, the newspapers held new news for him. Harry switched to a different newspaper and started at the front page again.

### Scrimgeour Succeeds Fudge

Rufus Scrimgeour, previously Head of the Auror office in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, had succeeded Cornelius Fudge as Minister of Magic. The appointment has largely been greeted with enthusiasm by the Wizarding Community, though rumors of a rift between the new Minister and Albus Dumbledore, newly reinstated Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, surfaced within hours of Scrimgeour taking office.

Scrimgeour's representatives admitted that he had met with Dumbledore at once upon taking possession of the top job, but refused to comment on the topics under discussion. Albus Dumbledore is known to (ctd. Page 3, column 2)

That one Harry read all the way through, though it didn't have anything more helpful to say.

Harry Potter, Vanished or Kidnapped?

Harry Potter, the only person ever known to have survived the Killing Curse disappeared from his home this Friday, July 12. Ministry Spokesman Stamford Jorkins, reporting on the boy's safety commented, "The boy vanished from a King's Cross Station bathroom, during a muggle day-trip with his family. Rest assured, The Boy-Who-Lived is alive and well, his continued safety has been assured by Hogwarts Headmaster Albus Dumbledore himself."

Is the Ministry as 'assured' as it pretends? Gilbert Wimple, from the Ministry Committee of Experimental Charms, reported seeing the Boy-Who-Lived in Gringotts Bank, just yesterday, in front of the Muggle Currency Exchange desk.

Can we really believe that the first man brave enough to report on You-Know-Who's resurgence is simply on holiday? The Ministry reports he is safe but the question remains, where is the Boy-Who-Lived?

So I'm the Boy-Who-Lived again. Harry noted, looking at his shining description in the useless article.

Though now I know that Ministry officials talk too much. No one was supposed to know anything about where I lived, or with who. Now the world knows the Dursleys live near London, to be taking the King's Cross Station. Harry thought, searching through the newspaper for an article on something he didn't already know about.

Perhaps being the brave Boy-Who-Lived to the Ministry will be useful, at least.

"Alright Dear, your turn." Madam Malkin interrupted before Harry could find anything else worth reading about. "You say you're new here?"

Harry nodded and stood up. Looking around he saw that Luna was already gone, though she hadn't said anything as she left.

"I'd like three pairs of the nicest quality robes you have, please." Harry said, looking around the shop.

"Would you prefer dressrobes or basic style robes, Sir?" Madam Malkin answered, suddenly sounding official.

"Err--" Harry cursed himself silently, he was supposed to be quiet while he was thinking, muttering 'err' was not going to win him any respect. "Three basic style, two dressrobes please. Black and earth-tones" Harry answered, trying to sound dignified again. He picked the colors from what he saw most on the street and hoped they'd help him blend in.

"Certainly. I'm so sorry for making you wait before. Please step onto the stool just there and I'll have a few robes for you to try." The woman said politely, her entire demeanor changed. Harry doubted she'd even think of calling him 'dear' now, though he didn't know exactly what had made her start treating him differently.

Like a Malfoy, Harry noticed, immediately wishing the woman would go back to calling him 'dear' and making him wait. By the time he'd made it to the stool Madam Malkin approached levitating an entire rack's worth of clothing behind her.

Harry picked out a few robes, pointing at robes and arbitrarily deciding to buy them. He didn't want to spend the time picking them out individually, and suspected that all of the robes Madam Malkin had picked out would look good on him. At very least they wouldn't stand out in Borgin and Burkes.



As always, with the help of magic the hemming and sewing was done within minutes, though Madam Malkin looked far more concentrated on it this time. Harry paid out of his Gringott's gold, and threw his old robes out in the store.

He'd barely made it back into the street when a very angry owl attacked him.

"What the?" Harry half screamed as the brown owl flew around his head and body, coming from the roof above. He realized the street traffic was noticing him again.

"On the ground, now." Harry ordered, using as commanding a tone as he could create. The Dursleys had given him a lot of practice at it. The owl landed and settled at his feet, looking up at him irritably.

Of course. Harry thought, as he remembered that owls couldn't find unplotable homes, so his spells had blocked them as well.

Luna noticing him would have interrupted a few of his anti-searching spells. Harry took the mail attached to the bird's leg, wishing he had treats for the poor angry thing. Instead he laid out two galleons in front of himself, knowing the bird could have been deployed for months now, waiting to find him. He owed the bird's owners for that, and hopefully it's owners would buy the bird some treats.

Harry pulled out his letter and saw the Ministry seal. He slit the envelope open with his wand and pulled out the official-looking document

Ordinary Wizarding Level Results

Pass Grades Fail Grades

Outstanding (O) Poor (P)

Exceeds Expectations (E) Dreadful (D)

Acceptable (A) Troll (T)

Harry James Potter has achieved:

Astronomy A

Care of Magical Creatures E

Charms E

Defense Against the Dark Arts O

Divination P

Herbology E

History of Magic D

Potions E

Transfiguration E

Harry scanned his grades, sure that months before he would have been upset about his Potions grade; he'd never get into the auror program. Snape wouldn't let anyone into his N.E.W.T level class with anything less than an O.

And thank god for that, he's the man who would figure out what I'm doing faster than anyone. Harry thought.

He didn't want to be anywhere near Snape's class.

Harry folded his letter into his bag, replaced his anti-searching spells,

and continued down the street, glad to get away from the staring eyes the owl had attracted.

Harry touched the doorknob to Borgin and Burkes and yet again almost yelped with surprise as he felt magic surge against his own. These were no slippery anti-muggle wards, Harry noted quietly, as he gripped the doorknob.

The magic felt dangerous, but subtly so, like a brittle layer of ice, or thin sheet of glass over a bottomless lake; beautifully intricate but sharp and deadly to anyone who stepped through it wrong.

Again Harry had to remind himself where he was, and forced himself to pull open the door and release it, knowing it wasn't wise to draw attention to himself in the middle of Knockturn Alley.

"Hello." Harry said as he entered Borgin and Burkes, forcing himself to be calm and collected.

"Good morning, sir." Mr. Borgin answered him.

"You have my books?" Harry asked, looking around the store for anything else that would interest him.

"Yes, of course, right away Sir." The dealer replied, rushing into the back.

Everything moved faster when people thought of him as a rich pureblood, Harry noticed. Within seconds he had a pile of books stacked in front of him.

Harry read over the five covers quickly, trying to decide whether or not Mr. Borgin was testing him again or not. They all looked conceivably illegal, titled *Spells to Kill* that the Muggle Ministry Understands, *get it, get it done, get out*. *State of Mind: Imprisonment, Detention, and Magical Torture*, *Applications of Magic to Death and*

Decay, Creating Terror, and Lord's Manifesto.

"Thank you." Harry told the dealer, unwilling to show whether or not he liked the man's choices. He knew *State of Mind: Imprisonment, Detention, and Magical Torture* was not one of the books he'd hoped to receive, but it was certainly illegal, so it was what he'd requested.

Looking around the shop, Harry finally understood what Borgin and Burkes was, and why it didn't get raided by Ministry officials. The shop was littered with strange, creepy looking products, but as far as Harry could tell, nothing he could see was actually illegal. Borgin and Burkes, as far as the Ministry was concerned, was a pawn shop at #4, Knockturn Alley. Everyone knew the shopkeeper kept Dark-Arts goods in the back, but no one was going to report anything. Like Harry, if they knew about the illegal goods, it was because they were planning on buying some.

And Harry needed polyjuice potion. Every day he got stronger magically, he looked worse physically. He was too skinny and too pale, his braids were filthy and tangled, his skin was going to get bruised from scurgifying himself instead of showering. He was making sacrifices to improve with his magic, and it was working, but the Hogwarts students would never understand. Ron and Hermione would never understand. They'd bring him to Dumbledore and demand that he be force-fed until he looked perfect and healthy again, and he couldn't allow that.

His plan was to get some of his own hair from the brush he'd left in his trunk at the Dursleys. He hadn't used the brush once since he'd left Hogwarts. He'd use the hairs on that with the polyjuice to look like himself before he'd started training.

Harry didn't know whether or not Mr. Borgin's pawn shop dealt in illegal potions, but it was worth the shot.

Harry leaned on the counter, thinking about how he wanted to go

about the next negotiation, he didn't care if he wasted money, but he needed to keep the man's respect if he was going to get good quality of anything he requested.

"Here's the deal, Mr. Borgin. I want Mandrake Draught, I don't want to go to the main sources and have questions poured over me, and I don't want to go wandering down Knockturn Alley to get it at a good price. So, if you've got it, I'm buying it from you. You name your price, I buy it at whatever price you put down. If it's a good price, I might very well need something convenient like this again." Harry said, doing his best to sound like a knowledgeable adult for once.

As if I know what the main sources are or where to go in Knockturn Alley. Harry thought, hoping the dealer didn't figure out that he was just buying time to look up whether or not he'd been screwed.

"A respectable deal, Sir. How much would you like?" The dealer responded.

"You mean you have it here?" Harry responded instantly.

Shit, shit, shit. Harry thought, knowing how young he'd sounded. He was always supposed to think before he spoke, and here he was blurting out sentences in the middle of the black market.

"Excellent, I'd like 500 ml." Harry said seriously, trying to recover.

Hermione had given them far too much of the potion when they'd tried it in second year. The potion only required a spoonful, but Harry was looking to stay on the potion indefinitely.

The dealer nodded at him, walked behind the curtained doorway to the back of his shop and returned with a corked vial of a dark, bubbling liquid, and placed it gently on the desk beside the wands. As Harry remembered, once Hermione had added the last ingredient, "a bit of who one wants to turn into", the potion frothed and tripled in

size.

Harry looked at the mud-like potion, hoping Mr. Borgin preferred to have a good costumer rather than a dead body on the floor. He had no idea whether the dealer had just handed him a poison or not, and he had no good way to know. He could hardly bring the vial to Professor Snape to consult.

"That will be 3,200 galleons for the draught, Sir" Mr. Borgin stated, slipping the potion's vial into yet another silk envelope.

As opposed to the ten thousand in the bag for the books and wands. There is no way those five books and wands cost 10,000 galleons. Harry concluded. Whether this is a test or a trick, I'm tired of being played by this man.

Harry carefully fit both of his purchases into his bag, thinking.

So would I rather waste money, and perhaps lose respect for paying for more than I bought, or try to walk out of here without purchasing something?

Harry thought over the magical shields he had layered over his person, and grinned slightly at dealer.

"Thanks for the books, I'll come back for another potion someday soon. Have it here. Good evening." Harry ordered and turned to leave.

Harry left the shop, unsure whether the man had tried to hex him and failed, or hadn't tried, but he was alive so he figured he didn't care. If the dealer felt cheated, he'd have to pay up front for his next batch of potion. That wasn't a tragedy.

It was time to go to the Hogwarts Express.

Harry wished he'd thought to grab his hairbrush when he'd left the Dursleys, but he'd never guessed how terrible he'd look after another month of studying. He was sure someone from the Order would bring his trunk up from the Dursleys, and if not he'd go back to Surrey to get it, but he didn't have the time for that now, which meant he had to keep himself looking healthy for Ron and Hermione without the potion.

That meant using glamours, which were difficult to maintain. He'd start them once he got onto the train, before the Order found him, Harry decided. Though he'd have to concentrate on it, rather than magical detection. He knew he wouldn't manage to occlude, detect magic, and hold up glamours at the same time.

First though, he had to get past the Ministry and Order members looking for him.

Harry spelled himself invisible in the Diagon Alley changing area, evanesco'd his wig, and passed through the Leaky Caldron trailing behind a wizarding family. He had his invisibility cloak, but the Order would be expecting that, and would find him within minutes.

It felt odd, walking casually through King's Cross station. He cast muggle avoidance spells around himself that made the crowd subtly part around him, careful to use his rosewood wand while he was still in the muggle area. He could walk easily through the station, wandlessly keeping up the muggle avoidance spells and casting more and more layers of protection wards around himself as he went. It seemed too easy.

The entrance to Platform 9 ¾ was spelled with layers of protections against muggles, which surrounded Harry as he passed through the wall. Harry recognized the slippery feel of their magic and remembered the chapters in Protection Wards and How to Cast Them Volume II: Detection and Dispelling, that taught him how to identify them. He felt a bit of childish curiosity ease as he detected

each individual spell that allowed him to slip through into the magical world.

It reminded him of Fred and George, who had magicked their way through the wards when they weren't supposed to, to give him those firestones so long ago. He could think of a half-dozen ways to pass undetected through the simple wards now.

Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  was scattered with Order members, Harry spotted as he entered the crowd waiting for the train. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley were loudly sending their children off to school, though their eyes looked too wary for it. He didn't like the fact that their duty to the Order meant they spent their time chasing him, it felt like a light kind of betrayal somehow.

Moody was waiting in the middle of the crowd, his strange eye circling madly. Harry was mostly sure the eye wouldn't be able to see through all of the protection spells he had layered over himself, but he still rushed past the crazed man and got onto the Hogwarts Express.

Harry walked invisible through the train until he got to the compartment where he always met with his friends. Hermione was already waiting inside, though she was supposed to be in the prefect's compartment.

She's been ordered to look for me too. Harry guessed.

Harry hesitated before he opened the compartment door.

He'd thought for weeks about how he was supposed to return to the wizarding world. He had a list of options, but he'd already rejected his plans to drop out of Hogwarts and buy books and tutors for himself. Living on his own in London had taught him how much time he would waste buying his own food and cleaning up after himself, even with magic's assistance.



And returning to Hogwarts meant he had to meet his friends again, and re-enter the wizarding public. He needed to choose the option that would lead him to be the best weapon he could be in the coming war, but he didn't know what that was.

He could hide his training, and pretend to be as carefree and useless as he used to be. As long as he avoided any direct attention, Harry thought could fool everyone into thinking he wanted to be left alone to grieve. He could still spend his time training, and they would learn to leave him alone, at least for awhile. Hermione was kind like that, Ron would follow her lead, and everyone else would copy what they were doing, and leave him alone to study.

It sounded like a waste of time, but pretending to be a useless wizard would give him the advantage of surprise against Voldemort when it came to the final battle. The element of surprise would be universal. Even Remus Lupin, an Order member he'd trained with once upon a time, thought of him as a teenager with a hero complex, Harry remembered that from being at Grimmauld Place. Lupin had refused to allow him to be an Order member, and rightfully so. Harry could appreciate everyone's condescension now; it meant no one would be defending themselves against him, or looking his way to see him do something illegal if the war brought him to that. Playing at being a normal fifteen year old could give him that chance.

Sixteen year old, Harry corrected, remembering that his birthday had passed. It hardly seemed important. He was a teenager, and an underage wizard, either way. He just had to decide whether or not he was going to act like one.

Harry hated the thought of lying to his friends, and he knew that struggling with that would distract him from his studies, but still, if such an elaborate act of lying would save him the war, Harry would do it any day. He might run away after the war to avoid seeing their accusing faces, but he'd sacrifice his friendships to save his friends.

He'd already made that promise to himself. He would sacrifice anything to win the war.

The problem was, he wasn't trained in how to judge what was worth sacrificing; he didn't know how to judge whether or not he would lose too much in return for that element of surprise.

He would not be able to earn respect if he was hiding his training. He wouldn't be able to show his control of magic, which meant he'd never be able to prove anyone of his determination to win the war. After all, if he wasn't determined enough to study until he dropped every day, who would respect his right to stand and speak as a contender in the coming war. And if he wasn't going to be powerful some day, he wasn't worth training, which meant he'd never be able to ask any help from anyone in training himself, and such a sacrifice could just cost him the war.

He didn't know, he wasn't trained how to know. It was why he needed a leader, Harry thought, remembering Dumbledore's kindly face with a grimace. What was a weapon without someone to wield it?

But he didn't have a leader, so he had to teach himself how to make these decisions, Harry reminded himself. He had to pretend to be comfortably in control until he stopped having to pretend.

He had already made and changed his decision a hundred times, but suddenly Harry had a new thought that cemented his decision. He couldn't afford to play at being a normal teenager because he couldn't afford to be a normal teenager anymore. He needed to teach himself how to be a leader, and to do that, he had to pretend to be one, for however long it took to learn.

He'd learned that lesson at eleven years old. He'd come to Hogwarts desperate to have a fresh start, where Dudley couldn't bully anyone from being friends with him. He'd pretended to be a normal, well-adjusted, if skinny, new Gryffindor, and somewhere along the line

the act had worked, and he'd turned out okay, despite the Dursleys abuse. Now he just had to do the same thing, but a bit backwards. He had to stop being a normal, well-adjusted child.

Which meant he had to stop being a Hogwarts student, and start being a wizard training for battle, Harry decided. If he wasn't hide his training efforts from his friends, he wasn't going to hide them from anyone. He could hide how unhealthy his body looked, and keep people from worrying about him too much, but if he was going to show the world that he was studying in his spare time, there was no reason to pretend to be a Hogwarts student anymore.

Which meant he was going to have a very interesting conversation with Dumbledore when he got to the school, Harry realized, suddenly grateful for his clean clothing and the potion that would keep him looking happy and healthy. Dumbledore would see through his weak glamours, Harry had no doubt. Which meant he had to pray someone brought his trunk up from the Dursleys, and he had to get to it and polyjuice himself before he went into the Great Hall.

But first he had to stop being an invisible mass staring at a train compartment door, and concentrate on glamours that would fool Hermione and whatever Order member came to find him, Harry thought, remembering where he was. Now that he was finally sure on his decision not to hide his magic, Harry felt himself relax.

Harry looked around to make sure no one was watching, and carefully slid the door open and closed it behind himself.

"Oh!" Hermione startled, staring at Harry. He knew she could only see the compartment doors behind him, which had seemingly just opened on their own.

"Hello, Harry!" She extrapolated happily.

Harry sat down and canceled all of his invisibility spells, focusing his

attention on his glamour spells instead. He looked out the window to where Moody had been waiting for him. Harry quickly took out a study-card and wrote:

I am on the train.

Harry opened the window and spelled the card to flutter around the train before landing at Moody's feet from a random direction. Then Harry canceled all of his anti-detection spells, knowing full-well the Order would find him within minutes now.

"Hello, Hermione." Harry answered.

Hermione's eyes traveled from his neck to his feet slowly before snapping back to his face.

"Hi, Harry." She repeated, blinking rapidly. "How are you? Are you alright? You look-"

"Sickly mate, did you not eat at all after you left those wretched muggles?" Ron broke in from the compartment door. Hermione startled, and Harry pretended to snap his gaze over to the doorway in surprise, though he'd heard Ron opening the door.

The glamours must not be strong enough to hide everything. Damn, Harry thought, annoyed with himself, though he knew he'd be able to hold up his glamours fine if he weren't actively occuding at the same time. He had to learn how to cast and hold spells while occluding, and it frustrated him that he still wasn't proficient at it, despite hours of practice.

"I got sick a few weeks ago, yeah." Harry lied. "Don't worry, yesterday I ate like a dozen sandwiches." Harry added. He wouldn't hide his training from them, but that didn't mean he'd allow them to waste his time worrying about how much he ate and slept and brushed his teeth. It did hurt though, lying to them.

"That was a lie." Harry declared after he'd thought for a moment. He hoped that admitting to a lie would mean they'd trust that whatever he said next was pure truth, and he needed them not to ask too many questions.

He'd tell the world that he was studying, and why, but not what he was studying, or how he was managing to learn so much so quickly. Ron and Hermione had proven the year before that they'd answer to Albus Dumbledore, even when Harry asked them not to, which meant they couldn't be trusted with anymore information than the Headmaster himself. And damn did that thought hurt far worse than lying did.

But he had two reasons not to want Hermione asking too many questions, Harry realized.

The truth was he already knew far more than any 7th year, and he didn't want to let Ron or Hermione know that, because they'd ask how he'd learned so much in one summer, which would lead to discussing his studying schedule. He might be willing to show the world how much he was training, but he didn't have to suffer Hermione's mothering. As amusing as it would be to see Hermione Granger tell him that he was studying too much, it wasn't worth the time Hermione would waste trying to get him to eat or sleep more. Wasted time got people killed.

"Let the Order come and berate me and I'll tell you guys everything." Harry lied, and saw his friends nod at him seriously.

Harry looked out the window and saw the Moody talking quietly to Lupin.

So despite his paranoia, Moody trusts Lupin to find me while he 'defends' the platform. That's interesting. Harry observed, knowing he'd remember the tiny bit of information. He didn't forget anything

easily now, it was one of the benefits of constant studying.

Harry watched as Lupin ran towards the train until the werewolf was out of sight, and started listening for the man's rushed steps among the roar of student's feet marching around the train's hallway.

He was going to lie to the man, and do so brutally. Harry leaned his head back into the seat and looked to the train ceiling, wishing obvious answers to his problems would be written up there along with the magicked graffiti that was flashing at him. He was going to have a hell of a year, he saw that in every decision he made. He was going to lie to his friends, and hide his life from them, something he'd never done before. They were the first friends he'd ever had in his life, and that made them the closest thing to family he'd ever had. He had a choice between risking his friendships and risking his friends, and he was sure he'd made the right choice, but that didn't make it any easier.

I will sacrifice anything for this war. Harry thought, clenching his teeth and sitting back up to face his worried friends.

"Where have you been this whole time, mate? Mum's been-" Ron started, but stopped short when Harry held up a finger for silence.

Just as Ron went quiet, Lupin threw open the compartment door, looking more disheveled than ever.

"Hermione I know we've asked but have you seen...Harry. Harry, you're okay." Lupin finished his sentence staring at Harry as if he'd never seen him before. The man's face relaxed into intense relief, before tightening in obvious anger.

"I assume Dumbledore received my letter?" Harry asked quietly. Lupin took out his wand and cast a spell. Harry recognized the wand motion as for a strong silencing spell called "Inanis" or in English 'void'.

"That you were safe, yes, but...Harry you can't just leave the protective wards and wander into London. You can't afford to act like a child anymore! You had us all worried sick and I find you here with your friends? Were either of you involved in this?" Lupin asked, turning to Ron and Hermione.

He's more condensending when he's angry. Harry noted somewhere in the back of his brain, and he thought of how he was going to respond. He decided on what he saw as his 'approach to life with the Dursleys': to gain respect, one had to demand it. It had worked with the muggles, though Harry didn't know if it would work with the Order member feeling so frantic. Though Remus Lupin was not someone Harry needed respect from, so Harry decided not to care too much, even as that thought stabbed at him.

He really did think of everything in terms of war, and ironically, he did that because he needed to, Harry considered with that same part of his brain that thought while the rest of him was concentrating.

"No one knew where I was, Lupin, and no one will. I sent a note to an agent of the Order that I was safe and would return to Hogwarts on time, as I have done. You shouldn't have worried, you should have trusted that I was keeping myself safe." Harry answered, and watched as Lupin became even more annoyed at him.

Harry knew what Lupin was thinking, that he was acting like a rebellious teenager, but Harry refused to try to explain himself like a child trying to escape punishment.

Lupin had to way, and no right, to punish him for anything. No one did, that was the problem with giving an orphan to an aunt who didn't care: with no one to care about him, there was no one to call home to, as teachers were wont to do. Harry remembered when he'd first figured that out. It was in second year, after Ron had gotten a Howler for flying the family car to school. After his school punishment, Harry

had waited for someone to express how disappointed they were in him too, but nothing came.

He'd counted himself lucky for awhile, until he realized it meant. No one had any claim over him, or his behavior. Lupin could be as disappointed as he wanted, but he couldn't do anything more than say that. Which meant he had exactly as much power as Harry gave him.

If Harry wanted to lay his self esteem in Lupin's hands, the werewolf could rip him apart for escaping into London and studying twenty hours a day, but Harry had already decided he was going to pretend to be his own leader now. Which meant he had to look into Lupin's face, and ignore the angry expression there. And what a lonely, empowering feeling that was.

Harry took out his rosewood wand and cast one of his most intense silencing spells on top of Lupin's when he saw the werewolf wasn't done berrating him.

"Harry you are barely sixteen. Of course we didn't trust your definition of 'safe'." Lupin protested. "Harry, where is your Fawkes wand?" Lupin asked, his eyes growing wide and frightened. Harry saw Ron and Hermione's eyes move to his new wand.

"I no longer have it, but I plan on getting it back." Harry lied, having an idea, though he doubted if it was worth it for a second when he saw Lupin's eyes snap closed, an exhausted expression taking over his face.

"You lost it?!" The man asked, his voice more expressionless than Harry had ever heard out of him.

"I'll get it back." Harry answered, hating how stupidly nonchalant he sounded, and how Lupin's face twisted in equal disgust.



"Harry, that wand is extremely powerful for you! It could save your life against Voldemort."

And of course everyone knows about the brother-wands. Why exactly did Dumbledore feel the need to share with the entire Wizarding world that taking my wand away would cripple me? Oh, of course, because no one in the Order would DREAM of betraying Dumbledore's trust. Not even Mundungus the black market fence. Like he doesn't even know the black market deals heavily in information. Even I know that. Hell, Loony Lovegood probably knows that. Damn it, Dumbledore!

"I said I'll get it back. You should trust me." Harry repeated, a small part of his mind still hoping that Lupin would see through his deceptions, would realize Harry hadn't been foolish, had been training himself, had been responsible for once..

"Trust you." Lupin repeated dumbly. "I'm disappointed, Harry." Lupin said, and Harry saw the truth of that in the man's eyes.

He has as much power as I give him, Harry reminded himself, desperately trying not to feel that look stab into him. Even so he had to struggle to keep himself from revealing all to his one-time professor, just to never have to see that disappointment again.

"Hermione, Ron, you should be in the prefect's compartment now." Lupin ordered, as if he still wore Hogwarts professor's robes. The werewolf canceled his silencing spell, turned, and exited the room without another word.

Harry cast another three highly powerful silencing spells over the compartment, knowing the spells would wear off quickly in the moving train. Magic was annoying like that, though at least the casting images would flare before the spells died.

"Lupin's going to have to apparate from Hogsmeade. You can't

apparate from this train." Harry commented, trying to hide how shaky he was feeling.

"How'd you lose your wand? Are you okay?!" Hermione broke in, sounding frightened.

"Er...I dunno how I lost it? I thought I left it on my bedside table, or my desk, but then it wasn't there, and I checked my pockets, and my trunk.." Harry let his sentence trail off.

"Don't worry, I'll find it next time I go to the Durlseys." Harry added.

And no way am I going back there. So much for not having to lie to friends. Harry thought silently.

"I thought that wand was really important." Hermione sounded ready to scold, and Harry braced himself, knowing he would have to disappoint yet another person he loved.

I said I'd sacrifice anything, didn't I? Harry reminded himself fiercely, shaking himself out of his depressed stupor, and realizing Hermione was talking again.

"-thought that wand was really important." She finished.

"It is, and I'll have it when I need it to fight Voldemort, don't worry" Harry responded truthfully.

And thanks to Dumbledore, the whole Death Eating world knows it's important. The least I can do is scatter a few of Voldemort's stupider minions over England in a wasted mission to 'find the lost brother wand' and win the war for their 'lord' Harry thought, feeling the weight of the Fawkes wand he'd left stuck in a holster he'd sewn into his robes and hoping he wasn't being foolish by trying to out-think anyone. He knew he was no military genius, but he could at least try to use the Death Eater's thirst for glory against them. Harry doubted

Voldemort would believe he had randomly lost his wand, but it was worth the shot. At least with this attempt to fool him, Harry didn't lose anything if it failed.

He had his wand, and though he'd lost even more of the Order's respect, that didn't matter. He wouldn't be asking any Order member for help without first determining that he could trust him or her, and once he knew that, he could show that he'd lied about losing the wand. Until then, he'd continue lying about it.

"Harry, what are you going to do at Hogwarts without a wand?" Ron asked suddenly.

"I've got one." Harry responded, pulling out the rosewood and cautiously handing it to his friend, hating how he'd never have given his wand away if he hadn't had a better one still in his robes.

"Wicked." Ron said with a grin, running a finger over the wood's black grain. The slang reminded Harry of the first time he'd met Ron, back when they still had baby teeth waiting to fall out and Harry had thought Vernon's fists were the scariest things in the world.

"Harry, where have you been all summer?" Hermione asked suddenly, though Harry had predicted the question would come soon.

"I went to buy this wand." Harry answered slowly, turning the rosewood wand around in his hand as he tried to figure out how he'd keep his secrets and his friends at the same time.

"And?" Ron prompted.

"And nothing, I just didn't go back to the Dursleys. I'm not happy there." Harry said vaguely. He had to get them to leave him alone, to accept why he was studying like mad and not interrupt him every hour to ask if he wanted to go play Quidditch or anything else.

"Alright, guys, I'll tell you what's going on but you've gotta keep this between us three, okay?" Harry said, trying to sound as dramatic as he could.

"It's about the prophecy." Harry announced. "The one the Death Eaters were trying to steal at the Ministry."

Neither Ron nor Hermione spoke. Harry had the impression that both of them had frozen.

"Nobody knows what it said, though," said Hermione quickly. "It got smashed."

"Although the Prophet says--" Ron began, but was quickly cut off by Hermione's glare.

"The Prophet's got it right," said Harry, looking between them both: Hermione seemed frightened, and Ron amazed. "That glass ball that smashed wasn't the only record of the prophecy. I heard the whole thing in Dumbledore's office. He was the one the prophecy was made to, so he could tell me. From what it said, it looks like I'm the one who's got to finish off Voldemort." Harry said, as if he hadn't quietly known that since he was eleven.

"We wondered, after we got back from the Ministry. . . Obviously, we didn't want to say anything to you, but from what Lucius Malfoy said about the prophecy, how it was about you and Voldemort, well, we thought it might be something like this. . . . Oh, Harry. . ." She stared at him, then asked, "Are you scared?"

"Not as much as I was," Said Harry. "Now I just know what I've got to do, I've got to study now. Like I haven't before." Harry looked between them both again.

Please don't try to stop me. Don't make me chose.

"So it's true then, the prophecy?" Ron asked quietly. "I mean, no one's ever doubted that Trelawney's a nutter." He added, sounding hopeful.

"It's true. It sounded exactly like the prophecy I heard Trelawney make second year." Harry said. "And anyway, part of its already come true.' Harry realized as he spoke. Some of the hope in Ron's eyes dimmed.

"How can you know any part of it is true? You can't tell if it's correct unless you fight You-Know-Who and win." Hermione argued.

Of if I lose and no one else can fight him, Harry added silently.

"Because neither of us can live while the other survives." Harry explained, knowing it was true as he said it. "Voldemort can't rise to his old power without proving that he can kill me, and power is his only definition of life. And while he's out there killing people I love-" Harry paused and memorized the image of their worried, loving faces, remembering that they were targets for the Death Eaters now, because of him. "I can't live until I kill him. I can't joke around and laugh and go shopping in Hogsmeade because that's how I got Sirius killed."

"You didn't-" Hermione tried to interrupt.

"I did." Harry responded with a tone of finality. He'd already accepted that and gotten beyond it, he wasn't going to allow her to lie to herself about it. They both had to be stronger than that. "Whether or not the prophecy is true, I can't sleep unless I've studied every hour of the day that I could. So now I have to be training myself, so that I can murder Riddle the next time I get within range."

"It's not murder!" Hermioned said shrilly.

"It will be." Harry responded, looking down at his brown shirt. Earth tones, so he could slip in and out of a crowd if he ever had to. He had no idea what the war was going to make him do, but he knew that he would do what was necessary, no matter how revolting that thought was to him. He could only pray his friends would be able to accept him afterward.

"It's not actually, Harry." Ron commented.

"Ron, I don't like it either but-" Harry started.

"No, hear me out." Ron interrupted him. Harry allowed it. "You're making yourself into a soldier, right?" Ron asked.

A weapon, not a soldier. I have no leader. Harry thought, though he nodded at Ron to continue.

"Well, soldiers don't murder. They kill, they don't murder." Ron answered, his tone dark. "You say anything else and you're calling my Dad a murderer." Ron continued.

Ah. Harry nodded.

"Alright." Harry agreed. "But I need you to understand this: I'm going to be fighting in a war this coming year. I'm in training to kill, and I need to train with every bit of energy in my body if I am going to survive killing Voldemort at the end of this." Harry didn't mention the fact that he didn't see any difference between murder and killing if it meant someone's blood on his hands and a body before him.

Silence descended in the train compartment, almost as if Ron and Hermione had heard his thoughts too.

"Bloody hell." Ron cursed, and turned to Hermione. "I guess that means we are too."

"NO." Harry declared loudly. Both of his friends turned to look at him.

They've never heard me sound so serious. Harry thought, looking at their startled faces.

"No. You don't see what I'm sacrificing yet, but I do. I'm giving myself to this fight, and I'm doing it so you don't have to." Harry tried to explain, knowing he sounded over-dramatic but not caring. As long as they understood.

"We'll be alright man, we'll-" Ron started.

"I'm teaching myself how to kill people, Ron!" Harry interrupted, careful to keep a lid on his temper that would make him want to shout at his friends. "And that's because someday soon, I'll actually be killing people. There's no way I'm going to let you go through that."

"There's no way you're gunna stop it." Ron argued back, crossing his arms.

"Harry, what was the D.A but training on how to survive You-Know-Who? You can't protect us from everything." Hermione argued.

"But I can try, and I will." Harry answered.

"Letting us be helpless is not protecting us." Hermione shot back.

"You can't make us not have to live through war, Harry." Ron argued, sounding more mature than Harry remembered him.

"Apparently only I can end this war. No one more has to get involved." Harry responded, but the thought seemed overly hopeful.

Damn it, what's the point of fighting if everyone I'm fighting for dies to help me fight? Harry thought desperately.

"Not true, mate. The whole wizarding world is already involved. My parents, the Order, everyone's choosing sides these days." Ron said.

"Fight to keep everyone alive, Harry, but if you try to keep everyone from fighting Voldemort, you will lose both battles." Hermione answered, suddenly sounding like McGonagall to Harry's ears.

"I can't lead everyone I know into war." Harry answered, knowing he'd lost the argument.

"No one is asking you to. The war is dragging us into it, not you." Hermione said, sounding like she was trying to reassure him. "Don't keep thinking you can somehow save us all." She warned him.

You have a saving people thing. Part of Harry's mind echoed cruelly. Harry winced and nodded. It wasn't his job to lead anyone but himself, nor to hide the war like Fudge, he was supposed to be the weapon, the tip of the spear, and nothing else. In that way he was a soldier, he didn't have to lead anyone in the war, but he couldn't stop them from joining it.

"I agree." Harry said slowly.

Hermione looked relieved, as if she hadn't just promised away part of her soul to the war too.

"You're still gunna do the D.A though, right?" Ron asked.

Harry wanted to think about it, but he wanted to think about it in peace. And first he had a lot of magic to learn.

"I'll think about it. But you both have to get to the prefect's compartment, and patrol the corridors and all." Harry replied as he dispelled his silencing charms.



"Oh my God, I forgot!" Hermione shrieked, jolting to her feet. Ron shook his head at her, and got up lazily.

"She's hopeless." He mumbled to Harry, and followed her from the compartment.

Harry pressed his hand to the side of the train as soon as they left. Like Borgin and Burkes' doorknob, he felt the magic as soon as he was really touching it. It was interesting, the train's magic felt like steel and speed. Harry spent the trainride feeling it, trying desperately to get a handle on magical detection, so that he'd be able to feel a whole room of spells like Anderling had described. He wouldn't be safe to enter any war until he could do that.

Harry met up with Ron and Hermione as soon as he got out of the train. Hagrid had already started his call for the "firs' years" and the rest of the school was piling into the carriages. Ron and Hermione were jumping up and down and waving at him over the crowd of students, showing more enthusiasm toward him than he'd seen in years of knowing them.

They're worried about me, Harry concluded, and met up with them. They were already caught up in an argument about which ornate carriage to take.

Harry's attention was quickly drawn away from their shouting, to the quiet animals attached in pairs to the garish carriages.

I wonder what thestral magic feels like. Harry thought, feeling almost called towards proud creatures. It was like the noise of hundreds of students laughing and shouting was drowned out as soon as he looked at them.

"Oi! Harry, come on!" Ron called.

Harry looked up and saw that he was standing alone in the thinning

crowd. Harry shook his head, ridding himself of the wasteful thoughts, and hurried to the carriage Ron and Hermione had evidently settled on.

The carriage was charmed to be lighter, Harry noted as he entered, and wondered if Fred and George had used a similar charm when they'd lightened his trunk. With that thought, Harry trusted the thestrals to easily find the way to Hogwarts, and sank himself into his magical concentration.

It was harder to keep up his awareness while he was moving. It had been easier in the train that moved so smoothly, but the carriage bumped and rocked him, and Harry found his concentration faltering. He had to practice that more, knowing he'd never be able to fight on rough terrain until he learned how to keep his balance while concentrating on occluding, magical detection, and casting spells all at once.

Before Harry had even started to learn the skill, the carriages had pulled to a stop in front of the main doors, and students were crowding beside Harry to get into the main entrance hall.

Hellos! Here's your next update! I've been rather hectic busy recently, so haven't got much fun writing done, but hopefully classes will settle down soon (aka I will stop add/dropping and actually keep a schedule for more than two days \*shakes head) But anyways, here ya go.

Hermione was right about Hogwarts, Harry noted as he sat beside his friends in the Great Hall. Even the table he sat near was seeped with magic that he could feel but didn't recognize at all.

Harry ate idly as the welcoming feast progressed. First years were sorted, and the new Gryffindors spent their time staring at him and his scar. Harry ignored them, and pretended to listen as Dumbledore stood up, spoke, and sat down.

Harry didn't hear anything that was said. He left one hand pressed to the wooden tabletop, almost reeling at the amount of magic he encountered. His mind was busy trying to piece out individual spells from the mass of magic that assaulted his senses. He recognized the essences of multiple complex protection spells but they seemed..twisted somehow, more complicated than any magic he'd felt before. Harry suspected it would be damn difficult to poison someone at a Hogwarts table.

"Harry. Harry!" Someone broke him out of his concentration. Harry turned toward the feminine voice, annoyed. It was Hermione.

"Harry, wake up man." Ron added.

I should be able to focus and keep up with conversation. Harry reminded himself. His occlumency 'shields' were up perfectly, but he'd forgotten everything else he was supposed to be paying attention to.

"Harry, Dumbledore asked to speak to you after the feast, remember?" Hermione said.

He must have said something during his yearly rousing speech. Harry thought, looking around the Great Hall. It was mainly empty now, save for a few scattered students. The tables were already cleared. Harry wondered idly when the food had been taken away, and if he'd eaten. He didn't feel hungry, but he rarely did after concentrating on something. Harry was about to return his focus to his magic when he remembered what Hermione had said.

"Oh. Thank you." Harry said to Hermione, knowing he'd responded far too late.

Harry grudgingly lifted his hand from the table and stopped focusing on his magic, before standing up from the bench.

He could still feel his magic, he could always feel it now, but he knew he'd need all of his concentration with him if he was going to meet with the Headmaster. Still Harry had to fight from taking off his shoes, and walking barefoot just so he could feel the magic seeped into the school's floor.

Harry took off running from the Great Hall as soon as the doors closed behind him. He got up to the

Griffindor Tower, and almost had a heart attack from the burst of noise that greeted him through the open portrait hole.

"Harry!" Someone called from the crowd, and Harry saw a small mob of first years turn and point at him.

"Join the party, mate!" Seamus called, holding up a half-empty firewhiskey.

"Can't, gotta meet with Dumbledore." Harry shouted over the din, pushing his way through the crowd and up to the dormitory stairs.

"Make sure you find out what happened to his hand!" Harry heard someone shout after him, though he wasn't sure what that meant.

The dormitory was eerily silent compared to the welcoming party downstairs. Harry closed the door behind him, and locked it with a dozen spells before he turned around. He almost sagged with relief when he found his trunk, brought from the Dursleys as he'd hoped, sitting in front of his bed.

Thank you, Order members. Harry thought gratefully, before tearing into the box to find his old hairbrush and potions set.

He took out his small caldron and poured the 500 ml of unfinished polyjuice potion inside before he threw in a whole lump of his old hair. As expected, the potion frothed spectacularly, leaving him with a pool of what looked like bubbling tar. It was jet black, and runny, and didn't stop churning and bubbling even as he poured it into individual vials. Harry used up all of his potions vials, and looked around for any other container he had. He had a couple butterbeer bottles kicking around the bottom of his trunk, but they were clear, and he wanted to be able to drink right in front of Dumbledore if their meeting stretched for longer than an hour.

So, Crouch's solution then.

"Dobby." Harry called into the empty dormitory. A crack and a squeak heralded Dobby's arrival. The house-elf stood in front of him, bouncing up and down on his toes.

"Master Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby squealed, obviously thrilled.

"Hey Dobby, I've got a favor to ask of you."

"Dobby is happy to help Harry Potter sir!" Dobby repeated. Harry doubted that he'd ever heard the elf sound so enthusiastic, which was saying something when it came to house-elves.

"Yeah, Dobby, would you get me a drinking flask? You know, like the one Professor Mad-Eye Moody used to carry?" Harry asked quietly.

"I can give you Professor Mad-Eye Moody's, Sir! He left it here when he went, sir." Dobby announced happily, disappearing and reappearing with two cracks before Harry had processed his sentence.

The house-elf handed over the battered drinking flask, that Harry recognized from his fourth year.

"Wow, perfect, Dobby. Thanks." Harry said, checking inside the flask to ensure it was clean.

"Dobby is a free house-elf and he can obey anyone he likes and Dobby will do whatever Harry Potter wants him to do!" Dobby declared happily.

Wow, I'll remember that.

"Really?" Harry asked.

"Of course, Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby answered, before disappearing with another loud crack.

Harry filled the flask with polyjuice, dropped his glamours, and took a tiny sip of the bubbling tar. It surprised him, and he almost spat it out before he realized that he needed the potion, and Mr. Borgins had either poisoned him or he hadn't, and it was too late, he had no way to tell.

Harry remembered the polyjuice tasting like overcooked cabbage, but this time it didn't taste like anything. It was more tasteless than water, which was a strange sensation in itself.

He felt the changes start immediately, and was grateful Hermione had subjected him to the potion before, else he would have been convinced he'd been poisoned. His stomach cramped and twisted like he was trying to digest a live snake, then his entire body started to burn and melt and somehow grow all at the same time. He watched his bony hands piling on flesh, and felt the process all over his body. It was good to know that as long as he kept up with the potion and drank it every hour, he'd only have to make the change every morning.

Harry found himself on the floor when the potion stopped twisted at him, though he didn't remember falling to his hands and knees. He stood up slowly and walked over the mirror.

Please work, please work, please work.

Harry looked at his reflection and grinned. His entire body looked normal: healthy and tan like he'd just stepped away from practicing on the Quidditch field.

Harry ran down the stairs and through the Griffindor party, knowing he was already late for the meeting Dumbledore had requested. He had to change his route twice when the staircases he'd planned to take were facing the wrong directions.

By the time he got to the hallway leading to Dumbledore's office, he was panting.

Harry leaned against the wall leading to Dumbledore's office, trying to regain his composure and thinking about his options.

He had already decided to let the world know that he was studying magic, and that he couldn't let Dumbledore know how dedicated he was to the idea. So he couldn't say that he ran away from Surrey into Wizarding London to buy more books because the thirty he'd taken from the library hadn't sufficed.

So he had to lie about that, or hopefully avoid questions about it altogether.

And thank god for Occlumency. Harry thought.

I can hide how little I sleep, I've been sneaking out of the dorm for ages, I can manage to study without anyone finding out, and that'll keep Dumbledore from having to ask too many questions. He'll either respect my decision to study, and let me do what I want, or he'll hide back in his fantasy of me as the perfect savior child, and let me do what I want, and I'll get out of having class and maybe being at Hogwarts won't waste too much of my time.

Harry thought over his decision for a final moment, and started the climb up the steps to Dumbledore's office. The gargoyles stayed out of his way for once. Apparently Dumbledore had broken his bad pattern and had remembered that Harry didn't know the password.

"Harry, welcome back. Lemon drop?" Dumbledore greeted warmly from behind his desk as Harry entered. Harry shook his head to refuse the treat.

"Thank you, Headmaster." Harry answered, settling himself into a chair. The instruments he's smashed months before were mostly fixed. Dumbledore was watching him, Harry noticed, and saw that the old man's sparkling eyes observing him more carefully than usual. Harry refused to return the gaze, though he wasn't quite sure how to look polite about it at the same time. His eyes ended up settling on Dumbledore's sleeve, and he found himself looking at a black and shriveled hand; it looked as though the flesh once on it had been burned away.

Harry considered asking about it, but decided against it. It was rude to ask, and more importantly, he needed to have larger things on his mind than whatever spell had rebounded onto his headmaster.



"I want to ask you how you are, my boy. I know this summer must have been trying." Dumbledore began.

Harry nodded quietly, thinking over his story before he started. He wanted to stay away from talking about his training, because that was certainly not a truth he wanted Dumbledore to hear.

The truth was he was exhausted of rushing, and yet ironically he didn't have time for dramatics about it. He had to study, he had to get better. People would die if he didn't, that was simply the truth, and it was not a price he was willing to pay for the right to cry or take long showers or sleep in when his head threatened to burst his skull into a million pieces.

And he was starting to get scared of that, of the pressure building up and bursting him into a million little pieces no one would be able to put back together again. There were days when the knowledge that he was improving was the only thing that kept him standing, and if he ever slept more than absolutely necessary, or dawdled eating, or decided to shower rather than scourgify himself, his guilt and grief would almost grind him into the dust. And studying was the only thing that made that terrible pushing feeling go away so he could breathe, he couldn't breathe when he wasn't improving, and Harry knew he was already very much not alright, and he wanted to curl up and cry and beg Dumbledore to tell him what to do, because if he was just following orders, no one's death would ever be his fault again.

But he had to lead himself, he'd already decided that. Dumbledore wasn't a leader, Fudge was incompetent and Harry had no idea who Minister Scrimgeour even was.

So he had to keep studying and pretending to lead himself, so that he could keep breathing, so that one day he could look up from his studies and blow Voldemort away with a magic the Dark Lord didn't even know existed, and he'd take potions to keep himself looking

healthy until then. He'd recover afterwards. He had already adjusted to studying all day without breaks, he was getting better, and it didn't matter if his body was crippled and torturing him by the end of the war. He had promised to sacrifice anything, and his health was the very least of his problems. He would be like those thestrals by the end, flesh and blood and magic keeping him alive, and if that was what it took to kill Voldemort, he'd happily give up the comfort of a good night's sleep. He'd already made that decision.

But Dumbledore would never understand that. The headmaster wouldn't accept anything that showed him that Harry's life wasn't fun anymore. So Harry had to hide it from him.

He'd stop me. He's too old to accept the casualties of war, he'll never accept losing me to what I have to do. There's no choice, I have to hide everything from him. Which mean...he's already lost me." Harry felt a wave of pity flow through him at the thought, washing away his anger for a moment.

That poor old man.. But Harry's compassion couldn't smother his anger for long.

Dumbledore had never made him work, would never make him work. The old man would give him anything he wanted, and more people would die, and Harry had no doubt that then he really would go insane.

So I tell him that I'm training, but not how much, and we'll see if he gets out of my way.

Harry looked up at Dumbledore, hoping the man wasn't a good enough Legilimens to read his mind even as he Occluded.

"I'm gunna be alright. Sirius death..it's getting easier." Harry stated, wondering if that last part was true or not. "It's just hard, knowing he won't be sending me another letter again. Hermione is trying to

convince me it wasn't my fault. I dunno, but I'm...I think I might be starting to believe her? Is that...Do you think that's wrong?" Harry asked, secretly wishing Dumbledore to reach one of his wrinkled hands across the desk, smack him across the face, and remind him that there were more important things than emotions in a time of war. Instead, Dumbledore smiled sadly at him and clasped his hands over the desk. Harry watched the charred skin of Dumbledore's one hand stretch crudely over itself as the old man moved it, and wondered if the sick feeling he got in his chest was pity or sympathy, and if there was a real difference.

"No, Harry," Dumbledore started kindly. "Sirius represented much to you that you had never known before, naturally the loss is devastating. It was cruel, that you and Sirius had such a short time together. A brutal ending to what should have been a long and happy relationship. I know how much you loved him. It's why you went to the Ministry for him. It was, in fact, a very similar mistake as the one I made with you. You wanted to protect him, there's nothing wrong in that, you did nothing wrong. Love is the strongest force you have against the Dark Lord, and you must protect that most whole-heartedly"

See Dumbledore, we're talking about my emotions, we'll still close, you don't have to check up on me, just believe I'd tell you if I needed help and back off.

Harry hid behind the blank mask he'd been perfecting all summer. It wasn't difficult to hide his emotions now, though his whole body was literally aching with anger. It was strange, feeling anger roar up in him when he hadn't felt the emotion since the last time he saw the headmaster.

Yes Headmaster, I love my friends. Which is why I'm not willing to watch helplessly as they die, let me protect THEM most whole-heartedly. I'm wasting time just sitting here having to talk with you. I'm living with Sirius's death, that's not the problem. The problem

is how many people I love that Voldemort is going to kill if I don't get to him first. Get out of my way.

"Leaving your Aunt's home was not wise, however, Harry. You were safer there than anywhere, my boy. Why did you leave?" Dumbledore admonished lightly.

I should have left that bloody house years ago, and you should never have left me there.

"Well, Voldemort's coming after me, right? I didn't want to endanger them." Harry lied, forcing his eyes to go wide with 'fear', and hoping the headmaster would respect his privacy, and keep his legilimency skills to himself.

"You mean your relatives? Harry, I assure you, your family is quite safe. Voldemort cannot enter there." Dumbledore reassured.

"The Death Eaters can though, right?" Harry asked, showing actual horror now when Dumbledore nodded. "And you just left me there?" Harry asked, staring at the Order's leader.

"The Death Eaters have no way to tie you to Little Whinging. You were quite safe." Dumbledore replied, his voice imbued with "understanding".

Because of course none of the dozens of people taking shifts watching my house would even Think of betraying me to the Dark Lord.

"Oh." Harry pretended to give in lamely. This wasn't the fight he wanted to argue about.

Should I have even bothered coming to this meeting?

"Harry, I'm afraid you didn't tell me the full truth last time I asked

about the library books you took." Dumbledore said quietly, looking over his half-moon glasses at him.

Does he suspect what I'm doing? Harry wondered, pushing more of his concentration into his Occlumency. He could feel his shields in his mind now, and knew that for the moment at least, no one was trying to get through them.

Lie with the truth, Harry thought quickly, forcing himself to stay seated calmly while his mind scrambled for a good answer.

"I was studying magic, sir. I figured something out while I was at the Dursleys, and well, I guess I'm still figuring it out, but look at Madam Bones, and Emmeline Vance, and you know, even Cedric-" Harry stopped, realizing his sentence had already deteriorated into rambling.

I have no idea how to do this, he remembered, and shoved the thought away.

"What did you realize?" Dumbledore asked softly.

"I have to kill Voldemort, Professor, or he's going to kill everyone I love. I can't hide from that. I can't afford to fool around anymore, I've gotta study, I've gotta get ready, and I could be the next one Voldemort takes down, but if it is, I've gotta make sure I take as many Death Eaters with me as I can, and Voldemort too if I can manage it. I'll sacrifice anything to win this war, Professor" Harry declared, trying not to glare into Dumbledore's proud gaze.

"Spoken both like your mother and father's son, and Sirius's true godson." Said Dumbledore quietly. "And I promise to do anything in my power to help you, my boy."

Harry had to smother a triumphant grin.

Perfect.

"Just let me do it, Professor. Talk to the other Professors, tell them to let me stay out of class, only until I can really finish this." Harry asked, turning his lie around to help him and watching as Dumbledore already started shaking his head.

"Harry, your education is of utmost importance, especially in these troubled times." Dumbledore said sagely, making Harry want to literally growl in frustration.

Just get out of my damn way, how hard is that? It's certainly 'in your power', Harry wanted to snap, but he knew he was already messing up the conversation, and snapping at the professor would only make it worse.

"I'm quitting Quidditch, Professor. I'm going to try to learn magic like I never have before, I won't be slacking off. But I'm about to fight a war, and Divination class isn't going to help me do that." Harry argued, hated the sound of his voice begging.

"Harry, I will do what I can to help you against Voldemort, but I hardly think that hampering your education is wise. Voldemort is one of the most accomplished wizards alive." Dumbledore refused.

"Just Astronomy then, and Herbology, they're important subjects, but not to me, not right now. I have to defeat Voldemort. Dumbledore, I need to study." Harry begged again, grateful that Dumbledore didn't know how very true that was.

Dumbledore nodded, and Harry almost stood up and whooped with his success. He'd just earned hours of his time back.

And I'll skip History of Magic and see if the rest are useful to me.

"Very well, my boy, I'll put in a word with your Professors, but you

must attend your classes until they give me their answer."

Not gunna happen.

"Okay. I can do that." Harry answered. "Thank you, Professor."

"I have a good excuse for it, actually." Dumbledore said, sounding more cheerful before he started again. "It is my wish that you take private lessons with me this year."

"How often?" Harry asked carefully, wondering how he'd go about refusing.

"Only about once a month, I would suspect." Dumbledore answered.

If it means I get to drop out of two classes without raising too many questions, it's acceptable. Harry decided quickly.

"If I'm having lessons with you, I won't have to do Occlumency lessons with Snape, will I?" Harry asked hopefully, thinking about how difficult it would be to hide how skilled he'd gotten with it. He'd mastered the first two steps, now all he had to do was keep his thoughts 'submerged' in his mental image of water, at all times, and he was occluding. All he needed to improve was study and practice, like with everything else.

The only thing I've gotten good at, despite two months of practice. Harry thought bitterly, before he pulled his mind back to his lies.

"Professor Snape, Harry—and no, you will not."

"Good," Said Harry in relief.

And why the hell does he think I suddenly don't need the ability to keep people out of my mind? Does he know I'm already learning that, or is this just more of his foolishness?

"That was a-" Harry stopped himself, trying to think of an appropriately angry-sounding word. He simply wasn't angry like he used to be, at least not at Snape.

This is why I'm supposed to think before I speak; because sometimes I start talking when I still can't find a damn thing to say.

"I think the word 'fiasco' would be a good one here." Dumbledore offered, smiling.

Harry nodded, and watched curiously as Dumbledore's cheerful smile slowly melted off of his face.

"However, I do think you should continue with your Potions lessons." Dumbledore continued. "Professor Snape has kindly offered to accept you into his NEWT level class, provided you take a few private remedial potions courses with him after school."

Harry felt his bottom jaw try to drop off of his face, and struggled not to raise his hand to physically keep it from sinking to the floor. He was sure Professor Snape didn't offer anything of the sort, but why on earth would Dumbledore order that? That was the type of special treatment that had taught Harry at eleven years old that he was allowed into the Forbidden Forest, he was allowed to go onto the third floor corridor, as long as it was in the name of one of his foolhardy saving-people quests. Harry had to clench his teeth until they ached to keep from saying anything aloud.

"Yes, Sir." Harry answered, with no intention of going to any of the classes. He'd take the detentions and skip those too, like he'd thought of earlier. He wasn't going anywhere near Snape until he didn't have to worry about the man's loyalties anymore.

"There is one more difficult subject we have to discuss." Dumbledore started. Harry bit his tongue slightly, as he had started to do while he



thought about anything. He couldn't think of anything serious that Dumbledore still had to discuss with him.

"Sirius's will was discovered a week ago. He left you everything he owed."

That would explain the massive pile of galleons in my vault. Harry thought, before the pain of the news struck him. He hated how final Sirius's death had become. He didn't question it anymore. No ghosts or veil or magical mirror would bring his godfather back to him. Death was something magic simply couldn't touch.

"It is, in the main, fairly straightforward," Dumbledore went on. "You inherit all of Sirius's personal possessions, including his Gringotts vault, which should have been added to your own collection of galleons by now. The slightly problematic part of the legacy is that Sirius also left you number twelve, Grimmauld Place."

"What's complicated about that? You can keep using it as headquarters, if you'd like." Harry replied when Dumbledore paused, hoping to speed the man straight to his point.

"Black family tradition decreed that the house was handed down the direct line, to the next male with the name of 'Black.' Sirius was the very last of the line as his younger brother, Regulus, predeceased him and both were childless. While his will makes it perfectly plain that he wants you to have the house, it is nevertheless possible that some spell or enchantment has been set upon the place to ensure that it cannot be owned by anyone other than a pureblood."

A quick image of the shrieking portrait of Sirius's mother that hung in the hall of number twelve, Grimmauld Place flashed in Harry's mind.

"If such an enchantment exists, then the ownership of the house is most likely to pass to the eldest of Sirius's living relatives, which would mean his cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange." Dumbledore paused

again, watching Harry, as if wondering when he was going to break and rip apart his office again.

Harry stayed silent, waiting for Dumbledore to continue.

"For the moment, we do not know whether the enchantments we ourselves have placed upon it, for example, making it unplottable, will hold now that ownership has passed from Sirius's hands. It might be that Bellatrix will arrive on the doorstep at any moment. Naturally, we had to move out until such time as we have clarified the house's ownership."

Again, Harry had to wait as Dumbledore paused.

I'm not planning on flipping out and destroying your office, get on with it.

"Fortunately, there is a simple test."

"Which is?" Harry asked, hoping to push the conversation along.

"If you are able to inherit the Black house, you will have also inherited Sirius's house-elf." Dumbledore explained finally.

Harry nodded once, understanding.

"Kreacher." Harry called.

There was a loud crack, and a house-elf appeared, with a snout for a nose, giant bat's ears, and enormous bloodshot eyes, crouching on the office's rug, covered in grimy rags.

"Kreacher won't, Kreacher won't, Kreacher won't!" croaked the house-elf, stamping his long, gnarled feet and pulling his ears. "Kreacher belongs to Miss Bellatrix, oh yes, Kreacher belongs to the Blacks, Kreacher wants his new mistress, Kreacher won't go to the

Potter brat, Kreacher won't, won't won't-"

"As you can see, Harry," said Dumbledore loudly, over Kreacher's continued croaks of "won't, won't won't", "Kreacher is showing a certain reluctance to pass into your ownership."

He knows too much to be set free, Harry reminded himself. Still the idea of owning him, of having responsibility for the loud creature that had betrayed Sirius, was repugnant. First though, he had to be sure he really had ownership of the elf.

"Won't, won't, won't, WON'T!"

Kreacher's voice had risen to a scream.

"Kreacher, be quiet." Harry ordered.

It looked for a moment as though Kreacher was going to choke. He grabbed his throat, his mouth still working furiously, his eyes bulging. After a few seconds of frantic gulping, he threw himself face forward onto the rug and beat the floor with his hands and feet, giving himself over to a violent, but entirely silent, tantrum. It was pathetic, and repulsive.

This could give me nightmares. He is FAR too close to a slave right now. So now I'm accepting owning a slave for this fucking 'greater good'. And damn it, I hate this war, and it's going to make me do so much worse than this. I'll do my best to treat him right, get him off the floor, and out of those rags, god, let that kindness help me live with this.

"Kreacher, stand up." Harry ordered, looking down at the furious elf. Predictably, the house-elf obeyed, and stood, though he would not look at him.

"Kreacher, I order you Answer every question I ask absolutely

honestly. Now, if I were to order you to get needle and thread, and to make yourself some respectable clothing, would that free you?" Harry ordered as strongly as he could.

"No." Kreacher said, spitting visibly on the floor as he spoke.

"Kreacher, get needle and thread, and make yourself some respectable clothing. Do not make any clothing meant to disrespect me in any way." Harry ordered, before looking up at Dumbledore. "Do I have to keep him with me?" Harry asked, remembering that Dobby, Winky and Kreacher all lived in the homes of their 'owners'.

"Not if you don't want to," said Dumbledore. "If I might make a suggestion, you could send him to Hogwarts to work in the kitchen there. That way, the other house-elves could keep an eye on him."

Harry nodded, doing his best to hide his relief from the miserable house-elf.

"Kreacher, go to the kitchens and work there with the other house-elves. Be polite to everyone you meet, wear the respectable clothing that you make, keep yourself healthy and do not intentionally shame me." Harry ordered. Kreacher gave Harry a look of deepest loathing and, with another loud crack, vanished.

"Good," said Dumbledore. "I'm glad to see you mean to treat him well."

Harry didn't know how to respond to that, not wanting to glare at the Headmaster but knowing the man deserved it.

Right. Thanks for implying I would mistreat him.

"There is also the matter of the hippogriff, Buckbeak. Hagrid has been looking after him since Sirius died, but Buckbeak is yours now, so if you would prefer to make different arrangements, it is your right"

Buckbeak could become seriously helpful to me. Harry considered, and made his decision quickly. It would be best to keep the hippogriff nearby.

"He can stay with Hagrid. I think Buckbeak would prefer that." Harry answered.

"Hagrid will be delighted," said Dumbledore, smiling. "He was thrilled to see Buckbeak again. Incidentally, we have decided, in the interests of Buckbeak's safety, to rechristen him 'Witherwings' for the time being, though I doubt the Ministry would ever guess he is the hippogriff they once sentenced to death."

Or that they would care. Harry added silently. There's a war going on, stop trying to hide that from me.

Dumbledore quickly changed the subject, and asked about how Hedwig was doing. Harry tried to draw out the fact that he'd left his owl with Ron into a full conversation in the hope that Dumbledore wouldn't ask anything more pressing. He ended up looking like a babbling fool, but in a lucky way--the Headmaster dropped all mention of the summer holidays.

"The Gryffindor password is 'hostel. Have a good night, Harry." Dumbledore said by way of dismissal. Harry had to struggle to keep his blank face, though he succeeded to hide his sudden urge to panic.

Hostel? What's the likelihood that's by random chance? How much does this man already know? How much was this whole conversation just a game? Damn it, I never should have come to this 'meeting'.

Harry returned to Gryffindor Tower uncomfortably unsure whether Dumbledore was playing him or not. Still, as long as the old man

didn't get in his way, he figured he didn't have to care.

Hello! There's not much to say today, so here's to fanfiction, and here's the next update:

~HP~

Harry looked up from his books when his magical alarm sounded. It was time for him to go on a run before his dorm woke up to go to the Great Hall. He could already hear the sounds of Ron grumbling about having to wake up in three hours.

"First day of classes, bloody awful." Ron's voice groaned from outside the curtains around Harry's bed.

Harry smiled slightly at the familiar voice as he packed his study materials into his bookbag. He'd transfigured his book covers to look like the Hogwarts 6th Year's textbooks. He was hoping to work his study routine around the Transfigurations, Charms, and Defense classes he still had to take. He wasn't sure how useful the classes would be; he'd already read through all of the Hogwarts required textbooks, but he could hardly expect Dumbledore to pass him out of all of the Hogwarts classes.

Still, he hated changing the routine he'd been following for months. He'd already had to change his sleeping schedule, to avoid waking up when other Gryffindors hadn't yet gone to sleep. He'd gone to bed at 11 PM, and lost an hour of sleep tossing and turning around in his bed.

Harry scurried himself, and for the first time in months, changed in fresh clothing. Harry put on one of his new fitting black robes, as per the Hogwarts uniform. He suspected that would be the only routine change he wouldn't mind.

Harry had almost pulled back his bed curtains to greet the other Gryffindors before he remembered the polyjuice potion. He looked at his bony hands, already grasping his bed curtain, and saw the white

knuckles sticking up from beneath the stretched flesh. Heart pounding at the close call, he released his grip and reached instead for the flask of polyjuice in his bookbag. He sipped it once and waited until his knuckles were well hidden beneath a normal layer of fat and tan skin. He hated looking like his old health; It was such a nasty reminder of his years playing Quidditch and Wizarding chess and thinking himself a hero.

It was going to be difficult to live on the polyjuice potion, Harry knew that already. He'd have to be constantly aware of it, for nothing would affect his polyjuiced body. If he were to even spill ink on himself in a class, the game would be up: his skin would remain unstained. His polyjuiced body would look exactly the same, all the time, every day, and if anyone noticed that, he'd be done.

Harry ripped open his bed curtains and pulled his bookbag over his shoulder, heading for the dormitory door.

Once Harry was outside of the sound-proofing spells, he ran down the dormitory stairs. He was not the healthy, happy child the polyjuice faked. He was going to be train.

Running was horrid, Harry learned within moments. The grounds were wet and slippery with dew and seemed made to make running difficult. He'd slipped three times as he tried to cast a spell and forgot to mind his feet. This was not a kind of double concentration he was used to, and every stride he took bounced his wand arm, making it impossible to cast any wandmotions correctly. Harry had to scurgify every inch of his body and robes before he felt fit to enter the castle again.

Harry sat down for breakfast, almost alone at the Gryffindor breakfast table except for a couple over-enthused first years sitting at the end of the table together. Harry nodded at them and pulled open his current Charms book, the Anderling book. He had an hour until class, and was planning on identifying some of the magic covering the



Great Hall before then. Food appeared before him, and he carefully picked food that he knew how to eat one-handed.

"Good morning, Mr. Potter. You're here earlier than I expected."

Harry looked up to see McGonagall looking at him approvingly. He put down his fork carefully as he chewed, and glanced up at her.

"Yes, Professor." Harry answered, wondering if he were allowed to ask her to get to the point. She obviously had something she was planning to say to him.

"You've come a long way since your first day here, Mr. Potter." McGonagall said with a smile. Harry looked up at her, confused where the conversation was going.

"Professor?" He asked, only then remembering that he was supposed to be closing the conversation so he could go back to his work. He'd already identified the charm that evanesco'd any spilled drinks.

"Professor Dumbledore informed me that you are to be excused from your Astronomy and Herbology courses, and why." She explained, then seemed to pause to chose her words carefully.

"Everyone knows these next two years are going to be trying, but I can see them being worst for you. I do not know, nor am I asking, where you were this summer, but do not try to take this fight solely upon your own shoulders, Mr. Potter. It is far too big for any single man to fight." McGonagall said, slowly placing Harry's schedule onto the breakfast table.

"Better a single Boy-Who-Lived, than an army of friends, who died." Harry replied, before blinking, wishing he'd answered more carefully. He'd said that more truthfully than he'd even expected to be able to.

Finally, he'd put into words the things he'd seen that wouldn't stop haunting him. Cedric, Sirius, and Mrs. Weasley's boggart of dead children at her feet, Ron, Bill, George, Fred, Percy. It had taken so many dead bodies of friends for him to realize what was worth fighting for.

Harry cleared his throat, before looking up at his Professor. He'd swear he'd seen tears forming in her eyes, before she blinked, and they were gone.

"If any other student had said that, I would have scolded his self-sacrifice and told him that war is for adults, Mr. Potter." McGonagall commented, almost glaring at him. "Alas, I respect your mission too much to say such a ridiculous thing, though I very much want to." She continued, a spark of something in her glare that Harry couldn't quite identify. It almost looked like pride, or amusement, or..something.

"Thank you, professor." Harry said as gratefully as he could. Finally someone was going to recognize that he wasn't one of the 'other students'. According to the prophesy anyway, a entire war's outcome fell on his shoulders.

She nodded and squeezed his shoulder gently before silently returning to the head table.

Harry picked up his schedule and scanned it, already thinking about how to work it into his regular studying routine.

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"Welcome to Hogwart's NEWT level Defense Against the Dark Arts

course."

Harry looked up from his book at Moody, who was evidently beginning his class now that the rest of the Griffindors had settled into their desks.

History of Magic had been predictably useless, but at least it was useless enough that Harry could study his way through it without anyone commenting. He was hoping Defense would be better.

"The last Professor Alastor Moody you had, as you have doubtlessly heard, was in fact Barty Crouch Jr. Do not interrupt my class to rejoice at how I am breaking the supposed curse on Hogwart's Defense class, for I'm not, and I don't give a shit. This is my first time teaching, but don't think that means I'm going to let you idiots run around hexing each other. I've been an auror for twenty years, and I'll haul your ass to the Ministry for the improper use of magic faster than you can say you'd rather a detention. I fought in the first Dark War, and you can bet your mothers there's gunna be another one. Pay attention, practice Defense every moment you can, and you might survive. As many of you know from that bastard Barty Crouch, I am known for my mantra **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**" Moody roared the last bit as he slammed a thick hand down onto the surface of his desk, making the entire class jump. Harry glanced over at Malfoy, wondering why out of the entire class, it was only them two who had managed not to startle. Maybe neither of them were listening to Moody enough to bother.

A nervous laugh ran through the class. Ron turned from his seat beside Harry and grinned at him knowingly. Harry looked back at him, wondering how was supposed to respond to the happy grin, and nodded, his mind still focusing on his book's argument for a new casting technique for the Petrificus spell. He'd try it later.

"You laugh, everyone laughs. I drink from my own goblet, eat with my own utensils, check everything I eat for poisons and everything I

touch for portkeys." Moody continued, his magical eye swirling around the class. Harry ignored the mad eye, to focus on Moody's real one, which was focused straight at him, and glaring.

Portkeys? Is this about the graveyard? Harry thought, meeting Moody's gaze until it snapped back to the class.

"During the past Dark War, every day I would make a list of who had died. If the list was small enough, I declared the day a success. Now if that won't teach you constant vigilance, nothing will."

The laughter in the class died out quickly, and left a sick kind of awed silence in its wake.

"You, repeat what you are saying for the class to hear." Moody ordered suddenly.

Harry looked around towards where Moody had gestured, and saw Malfoy leaning towards Pansy Parkinson and Crabbe, a clear sneer marring his face.

"Oh sir," Malfoy emphasized, "I was just mentioning how then you got locked in a box for ten months by Barty Crouch's son of all people." Malfoy repeated in a somehow polite voice, a joyous grin on his face.

The rest of the class turned towards Alastor Moody, obviously waiting to hear Malfoy punished.

Why do they care what happens to Malfoy at all? He's practically a fucking Death Eater and we're at war. What do they care if Moody takes points from Slytherin? Harry thought, eying the other students blandly.

"That I did, I failed to keep myself safe and almost died as the result, after spending ten months locked in a clothing trunk. But hell, take it this way, if that won't teach you constant vigilance, fucking nothing

will." Moody answered.

The class laughed. Harry didn't.

Harry watched Moody drop a poison-detecting powder into his goblet and inspect it before he drank. He'd already tested it twice.

"Blimey, now I'm not sure if he's insane, or just smart." Ron whispered, apparently also watching Moody check his entire desk for spells before he replaced his goblet on it.

"Insane." Harry answered back immediately.

"I just want him to start the class." Hermione whispered over Ron's right shoulder. "We're four chapters behind where we ought to be in Defense of the Dark Arts, and with Umbridge we didn't even practice the material we did cover." She complained.

"Alright everyone, let's get something straight." Moody said gruffly, quickly gaining the attention of the class. Even the Slytherins appeared to respond to the rough tone. "Due to Headmaster Dumbledore and his requests, we will be focusing on defensive tactics. Still, this is a class teaching you how to fight, have no question about it. Some of you might call yourselves 'pacifists' but let me tell you, clean up after a single Death Eater raid and you won't be pacifist for long." At this Moody spat onto the stone floor. The spittle disappeared immediately.

"Ew." Harry heard one of the Slytherin girls say before Moody continued.

"A muggle named John Stuart Mill, born in 1806, said this: "War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things. The decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is worth war is much worse. The person who has nothing for which he is willing to fight, nothing which is more important than his own personal

fucking safety, is a miserable creature and has no chance of being free unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself."" Moody quoted emphatically, obviously from memory.

"That is my take on war. I will fight the Dark Lord with every bone in my body because I believe that this war is more important than me. Hell, Voldemort's war had already taken a leg and an eye from me. Apparently I'll make my life's sacrifice in parts. It is your choice to join and fight or hide in a hole. That is the freedom that the Ministry of Magic has given us, and ironically it is the freedom I've been fighting for for the last twenty fucking years. The freedom to choose to join this damn war. Don't worry too much about which choice you make, you'll know you've made the wrong one if you see me laughing while I blow you to charred little Death Eater pieces." Moody grinned, his scars stretching his face to make the expression look horrific.

Is Dumbledore honestly allowing this man to teach first years? Harry thought incredulously.

"My job right now unfortunately is to teach you how to become better at fighting but you damn well better remember to wear long sleeves to my class. If I see a Dark Mark in here, I will not ignore it, and trust me, I see quite a bit." Harry watched Moody's magical eye flicker between students, always pausing on their left arm before moving on.

How much does he already know?

"Remember, constant vigilance. I have no idea if any of you are my enemies, sitting polyjuiced before me. Right now, I don't have to care, because I won't be teaching you anything that my enemies don't already know, and I have seen a few of you fight, and the attempt, if not the results, were fucking hilarious." Moody continued. Again Harry saw Moody's real eye settle on his face.

"You are slow, hesitant, and loud. You know a wizarding duel

between two experts by how intolerably bloody silent it is until the moment one of them dies. You idiots run around screaming non-lethal spells at the top of your lungs, as if by shouting expelliarmus you are three times as effective. Let me tell you, if no one else has, concentration is the only thing that makes a spell more powerful, shouting just makes your spells three times as sodding predictable. Someone here, bore me with this, what is the advantage of a nonverbal spell?" Moody shot out.

Hermione's hand shot into the air.

"Yeah?" Moody waved casually at her.

"Your adversary has no warning about what kind of magic you're about to perform, which gives you a split-second advantage." Hermione answered.

"Good, some random number of points to Gryffindor." Moody waved his wand casually before carefully replacing it in a holster attached to his belt.

The class laughed quietly. Harry could feel them waiting for Moody to clarify how many points he'd given out.

"Silent spells are simple, you do exactly the same wand-motions as you're used to, and concentrate on the incantation words you are accustomed to saying aloud. Split into pairs, practice it." Moody ordered, before returning to his desk and sitting down.

The class waited, looking around at each other to see if they were supposed to stand up yet or not.

"Quite honestly, that wasn't a difficult instruction. This is not a dog and pony show, I'm not going to tell you when you can get up or sit down or wind your watch or piss. We're living in a country at war, what does that mean? It means DON'T FUCKING HESITATE"

Moody roared again, throwing his goblet at the side wall, which hit with a crack, instigating the screeching din of twenty-odd chairs getting pushed back across the floor as students rushed to obey.

Why on earth did I not think to practice silent incantation? Harry wondered, kicking himself.

Harry quite purposely wandered around the room until everyone was already paired up. There was an odd number of kids in the class, and he was hoping to be the one left alone to practice by himself. It worked, and he soon found himself a corner to work in.

Wingardium Leviosa, Harry cast, moving his wand in the classic swish-and-flick motion towards one of the school desks.

The motion, he'd only learned that summer, was designed to set borders for the spell. One had to swish the wand back and forth, concentrating on the edges of the object the wizard wanted to lift, to avoid trying to lift an entire wall, rather than the feather in front of it.

Harry smiled when the desk lifted on his first try. He slowly returned it to the ground, looking around for a different spell he wanted to try. He caught a glimpse of Ron's red hair and grinned.

Fuoco Croceus, Harry casting, pointing his wand straight at Ron. As soon as he saw Ron's hair turn a bright, nasty yellow, he turned around, and resumed lifting his desk, laughing silently.

Wasting time again? A nasty part of his brain asked him, and Harry felt himself wince. He searched through his memory for a harder spell to practice now.

Silentium Caementum Atratus, Harry cast, struggling to concentrate on the incantation words and cast the complicated silencing spell at the same time. A thin image of dark-gray stone flickered along the



walls before disappearing.

Damn damn damn, I should have started practicing this weeks ago. Harry thought, cursing himself, before he dropped his concentration on magical detection so he could concentrate more fully.

SILENTIUM CAEMENTUM ATRATUS, Harry tried again, and heard the gasps of surprise from the class when the stone walls all flashed pitch black.

"An impressive display of silent magic, Mr. Potter." Moody called from the front of the class, sounding far too much like Snape for Harry's comfort. Somehow the man had made a compliment sound ugly.

"Thank you, sir." Harry answered, watching Moody carefully.

The man's scarred face looked back at him and Harry thought for a moment that the auror was going to scoff.

When did I anger him? He stood with me against the Dursleys last summer, and I haven't spoken to him since. Harry thought, before noticing the class gaping at him. Even the Slytherins had yet to shake the surprise from their faces and replace it with something uglier.

Am I sure I want to show the world how much my magic has improved? Harry questioned himself quickly, before remembering that he'd already made his decision, and for good reasons.

I'll hide the wandless magic. I can practice with a wand around the students without slowing myself down, and maybe I'll keep a little bit of that element of surprise I'd hoped for. Yeah, sure Harry, you know exactly what you're doing. Harry thought sarcastically, double checking that he'd cast the spell with a wand.

I can't even remember if I'm using a bloody wand or not. I couldn't

have even done that spell without one.

Harry glanced up at Moody, and winced away from the scorn he saw there.

And bleedin' hell, I do not need another professor on my arse all the time.

Harry took out his transfiguration book, Transfiguration: an advanced study Volume II, and a quill, planning on practicing far more difficult, and less spectacular spells for the rest of the class.

He started on an intense transfiguration spell meant to change a benign object into a perfect, working watch. It was difficult because magic disrupted electronics, so the watch had to be an older style, mechanical wind-up. Every part had to be transfigured perfectly, and Harry wondered if doing it silently would be too much of a challenge for him.

"Blimey Harry, what spell was that? That was wicked!" Ron interrupted him.

"A silencing spell." Harry answered, trying not to let his concentration break.

"I think this class is going to actually teach us something!" Hermione announced happily, coming over to join them. Harry looked up at her and saw the rest of the class had left, apparently along with Moody. The classroom was empty but for Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle still trying to hex each other silently.

"Hey err..sorry guys but I've gotta focus on this." Harry said, gesturing to his book. He had a free period next and was planning on staying until he had a watch in front of him.

"What are you studying mate? It's only the first day of class." Ron

asked, obviously missing the point.

"Transfiguration." Harry answered, feeling the spell he was building in his head start to fall apart. He'd been halfway through focusing on it and was losing it fast.

"What book is this, it looks old." Hermione asked, holding his place as she flipped the book to see its cover.

"OH MY GOD!" She screeched, jumping up and down. Harry looked over calmly, wondering why she was exploding.

"You alright there, Herm?" Ron asked, glancing back at Malfoy's group who were now staring at their corner.

"Apparently the muggle-born just discovered the written word." Malfoy sneered from across the room.

"Shut up, ferret-face." Ron snarked back.

"Haven't you heard the mudblood phrase, people who live in dole houses shouldn't throw stones?" Malfoy responded with a pleased grin.

"Glass houses." Crabbe whispered to him.

"You're an idiot." Malfoy replied, staring at Crabbe with an incredulous expression.

"Can't get anything past you, Malfoy." Harry said with a bark of laughter. He wasn't even sure why he was getting into this, but once he spoke, it was too late to bring it back, and Malfoy turned to face him instantly.

"What is that supposed to mean?" The Slytherin asked aggressively, turning back to the exchange.

"That you don't have any friends. You have thugs, and guess what, thugs aren't really known for their engaging conversation." Harry replied, flickering his eyes over Crabbe and Goyle, and almost feeling bad for Malfoy for a moment.

God Draco must be bored.

"Unlike you? You have nappy-haired Granger and Ron Acne Weasley for company. A half-blood, a mudblood, and a bloodtraitor. The great Golden Trio of trash." Draco replied looking the three of them over carefully.

Sympathy gone. Harry thought.

"Oh you bastard-" Ron growled, starting forward.

"RON!" Hermione yelled, grabbing his arm to pull him back.

"Oh no, Granger. Let him go. I want to see him prove how refined his family is by trying to punch me in the face. Talk about thugs then, Potter." Malfoy replied, leaning casually against the classroom wall.

"I'd do more than punch you in the face." Ron threatened.

"Oh, you mean, if you weren't getting fiercely held back by a girl?" Draco replied with a horrid grin.

"I think he means if he were willing to go anywhere near your face, Malfoy. Who knows, that level of ugly might just be contagious." Harry answered for Ron, almost grinning too now. This wasn't the full out fight he'd been itching to have for months, but at least this verbal sparing was more engaging than Dudley or the hostel grocery store man.

"At least I'm not recognized purely by a scar on my face. Which, by

the way, is hideous and disgusting." Draco replied.

"I think it looks fine!" Hermione yelled.

"Oh shut up, streetwalker. No one here cares what you have to say about it. Potter certainly doesn't." Malfoy replied flippantly, before focusing his eyes back on Harry.

"You don't, do you, Harry. 17 years old and kissed once. And the entire school knows you described it as 'wet'." Draco drawled. Harry struggled not to blush.

"What's your point, Malfoy?" Ron spat out.

"It's obvious, Weasel. Your girlfriend's already blushing about it." Malfoy replied, smirking at Hermione. Harry turned and saw that indeed, Hermione was quickly turning red.

"Herm?" Ron asked quietly.

"Oh fine, I'll put you out of your misery and explain it myself. Harry "Golden Boy" Potter likes flying broomsticks a little bit too much." Draco answered with a triumphant grin.

"Jokes are usually funnier if you don't have to explain them, Malfoy." Harry commented, attempting to sound dispassionate and avoid blushing at the same time.

"I still don't get it." Ron added triumphantly.

"That's hardly an insult against me." Draco replied. "Here, I'll give you a muggle phrase for it, to help you out. Harry Potter drives stick."

"Isn't that a term about cars?" Ron asked Hermione, whispering too loudly.

"He's calling me queer, Ron." Harry explained finally, suppressing his reaction to roll his eyes.

"Oi!" Ron yelled, instantly defensive. Draco looked straight at him, chuckling, flanked by his two goons. They laughed whenever he did. Draco seemed to notice that, and glared at them before turning back to Ron.

"You're not the finest argument for pureblood breeding, I must admit." Draco commented.

"Neither are you." Harry spat out immediately, his mind racing for the next insult. "A half-million sperm and you were the fastest? Doesn't say much about your daddy."

Ron came out with a choked laugh, obviously split between being furious at Draco and laughing at Harry's insult.

"At least my daddy isn't six feet under, Potter." Draco shot back equally quickly.

Harry had to force himself not to wince.

"No, he's just spending the summer bent double playing some dementor's jail-bitch. Malfoy's don't bow, right? Well then your father had better learn to kneel." Harry snarled out, and heard Hermione gasp behind him.

"But oh wait, refined Lucius Malfoy learned to kneel when he became Voldemort's lapdog, didn't he? So jail must be no trouble then." Harry continued.

Harry saw Draco pull his wand into his hand furiously, and cast a strong protego shield around the three of them to hold up wandlessly while they fought.

"Caronius-" Draco started what Harry recognized as a Dark curse that contego would block. It was only in the last minute that he realized that Draco's wand motion didn't fit the spell he was incanting, and what that meant. He rose a different magical shield just in time to block the green jolt of magic that shot at him faster than he'd have believed. The spell that broke against his shield was an eviscerating hex, Harry identified.

This could be bad, Harry thought, as he realized he hadn't even started to fight back yet, and then had to decide which class of offensive magics he wanted to use. Draco was already fighting with Class 2 'painfully debilitating' hexes. Was this supposed to be his first Death Eater kill?

Harry started a wandmotion for a freezing hex, hoping he'd be able to catch Draco off-guard and stun him. He needed to think, damn it.

"Stop." A gruff voice ordered from Harry's right.

And surprisingly, Harry saw Malfoy immediately start to obey. Harry watched him carefully, maintaining his contego shield as he saw Malfoy put away his wand.

Moody slowly shuffled into Harry's sight as he made his way between Harry and the three Slytherins. To Harry's surprise, the auror continued past them all, to sit at his teacher's desk, looking almost bored.

He's pretty damn convinced we're going to obey him. Harry thought, glancing distrustfully at Draco.

Or he's pretending, thinking we're more likely to obey if he acts like we're going to. Harry second-guessed, remembering using the trick with Dudley a few times.

Either way Moody was right, Harry noted as he watched Draco even

moved to hide his wand back in his robes.

And a single word from a professor was enough to stop all of us from a hexing duel? Harry questioned, glancing between Draco and Moody. Draco looked angry, and was quite obviously grinding his teeth, but didn't look prepared to kill anyone anymore. Moody seemed relaxed. He was sitting at the professor's desk, rubbing his hands up and down his peg leg.

Either Moody has considerable authority over Draco, or Moody's act worked damn well. Harry thought, watching the crippled auror.

Harry concentrated on keeping his shield up wandlessly as he lowered his own wand and slid it into its sleeve-holster. One of the nice things about spells without casting images, Harry realized, was no one without magical detection could tell whether or not they were still in place. Draco certainly didn't realize, Harry noted, glancing at where Draco had stored his wand.

"Now sod off. Get to your next class or wherever you've got to be." Moody ordered them with a casual wave of his hand toward the door.

"You can't speak to me like that." Draco whined, putting considerable emphasis in saying 'me'.

"Alright, you can either fuck off, or I could drag you down to the Ministry and tell them I caught you attacking the great golden Harry Pottter, the Boy-Who-Lived-to-be-the-Savior-of-the-wizarding-world. We'll see how long you last sucking-face with the Dementors." Moody replied, though oddly he was glaring at Harry the entire time. Harry looked back, intrigued more than offended by the man's hostile gaze. Draco left, his robes swirling around himself as he went, which somehow gave his exit some dignity.

Draco threw a last sneer at them and turned his back on them all as he walked confidently from the room. Harry watched him carefully



before leading Ron and Hermione from the room, still holding the shielding over them all.

"Blimey Harry, that was wicked. He almost pissed himself with some of those disses!" Ron exclaimed as soon as they left.

"It wasn't wicked, Ron." Harry responded carefully, trying to figure out how he could get out of the coming conversation and return to his dorm to practice silent magic and think.

"Harry, what happened back there? You've always fought with Malfoy but-" Hermione stopped, obviously struggling for words.

Harry thought about the fight they'd just narrowly avoided and started to realize how stupid he'd been.

"It was more serious this time because both Malfoy and I have apparently grown up enough to say crueller things, and apparently neither of us are old enough to stop wasting the time it takes to make them." Harry answered, angry at himself. "I'm supposed to be studying, not running around doing stupid shit like that." Harry said, gesturing down the hall at the classroom they'd left.

"Bloody hell!" Harry cursed suddenly, throwing a wandless ball of fire down to explode in a shower of sparks on the ground. Wasting magic didn't help, and it didn't keep him from seeing Hermione's pale, scared face.

Aaand there's the expression I never wanted to see with her looking at me. God DAMN do I hate this war.

"You know what, I'm supposed to be studying in the library now, and you've gotta go practice that silent magic. I'll see you two later." Harry dismissed before heading towards the closest staircase.

"Hey! Potter boy!" A rough voice called from behind him. Harry turned

to see Moody leaning out of the classroom.

Didn't he just tell us to leave?

Harry growled in frustration, Hogwarts wasted so much of his time.

"What?" Harry barked back at the man.

"Come here." Moody ordered, before disappearing back inside the classroom.

"We'll meet you at lunch, okay Harry?" Hermione asked, obviously hesitant about leaving Harry alone with Moody.

She's becoming less trusting of teachers. Harry noted approvingly as he gestured for his friends to continue on their way to the Great Hall.

Harry entered the Defense classroom, and found Moody sitting in the chair beside the professor's desk at the front of the classroom, rubbing his hands over the spot where his pegleg met his knee.

"You'd think after twenty years the Ministry would provide an auror with something better than a damn twig strapped to my damn stump. And now they come and say I have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. "Post" being the operative word." Moody grumbled, before glancing up at him and standing up.

What the hell does this man have against me? Harry wondered again.

"Sit down, wonder boy" The man ordered, waving towards the classroom chairs. Harry glanced over them, and instead chose to lean back against one of the individual student desks. He had a feeling he wouldn't want to be trapped in a chair during the coming conversation.

"Tell me, Harry Potter, what room was I in, when Barty Crouch's secret came out?" Moody asked quietly.

"Er...what?" Harry asked, instantly feeling like he'd missed something. He had no idea what Moody was planning to talk to him about, but he hadn't expected random questions about the department head for the International Magical Cooperation office.

"Barty Crouch Junior, when his secret came out, what room was I in?" The man repeated clearly, running his stained fingertips over the professor's desk in a gesture that was undoubtedly threatening, though Harry wasn't sure why.

Harry felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up as he realized the auror was testing him for polyjuice.

Am I in danger right now? Harry wondered worriedly, before he set his concentration on Moody's question.

Barty Crouch Junior's secret, which one? Harry thought, remembering the outpouring of truth Dumbledore had discovered, with Crouch under Veritaserum.

It doesn't matter, it all happened in Moody's office. Harry remembered swiftly.

"In your office. You were in the trunk the whole time." Harry answered swiftly, trying to keep his eyes from staring fearfully at Moody's wand.

Harry reminded himself of all the reasons why he'd learned to hide his emotions and kept his face and posture looking calm. Harry met Moody's gaze and slowly raised an eyebrow, silently asking what the professor was going to do next. He didn't trust himself to speak without mangling his sentence and sounding terrified or childish.

"How the hell did I fit in a trunk? I'm short for a man but not that

short." The gruff man pressed.

"There was an underground room, in the trunk, probably made by a simple expansion spell." Harry answered, thinking over what he could remember of that day.

"What did you throw down to me, when I was discovered in the trunk?" Moody asked.

Shit. Harry thought immediately, unsure he even had thrown anything down to the man.

Dumbledore opened the trunk, not me.

"I don't remember." Harry answered honestly, wandlessly strengthening the shield he still held up as he moved his hand closer to the wand in his left sleeve.

Moody was squinting at him now, and somehow it looked just as threatening as his glare. Harry felt his heart rate speed up.

"You don't want to test me, if that's what you're doing, boy." The man growled, slowly standing up, and pointing his wand at him.

Harry pulled his hands up slowly, hoping the wizard would understand the muggle show of submission.

"I honestly don't remember, it was two years ago and I'd just had a professor try to kill me. Ask me another question, I'll prove I'm not polyjuiced." Harry said, trying to keep himself from just attacking the auror; he'd never make it out of the classroom. Instead, Harry threw all of his concentration into his wandless shield.

"You thought I'd be so vulnerable? So easy to fool? I suspected you from the moment I saw you, the Potters' child is all awkward innocence and idiocy. Imposter!" Moody shouted suddenly, and a

stream of magic flew from his wand.

Harry noticed three things immediately. He had no idea what the silent spell was, or if his shield would block it, and it was moving too fast for him to try to dodge.

"Protego, Ancile Erectus, Vadum" Harry cast as quickly as he could, throwing up three different shields in succession and bracing himself as he saw Moody's hex explode right in front of his chest. He felt the magic as it shattered against his own. It felt cold, and thin. Dangerous magic, then.

"WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING, I'M A BLOODY STUDENT!" Harry shouted, his fear quickly translating into anger. "HOLY FUCK I DON'T REMEMBER WHAT I TOSSED TO SOMEONE TWO BLOODY YEARS AGO!" Harry shouted, before he remembered that he was supposed to have perfect control over his temper now. He'd thought he'd had it under control for once.

Calm, calm, calm. Imagine him in his underwear. Harry thought, remembering that that was supposed to help with something. Oddly enough, it did calm him down, though he wondered if there was a way to wash the terrible image from his brain.

"Do you know you make six out of six Defense teachers who have attacked me now?" Harry commented in an attempt to dispel his rampant adrenaline with humor, even as he decided to use a painfully debilitating hex if he ever got the chance to use magic back at the auror. Painfully debilitating spells were more reliable, and he didn't know what tricks the auror knew on how to escape freezing hexes.

"It is you." Moody said with a sneer, shrugging and stepping away from him.

"Yeah, no shite." Harry replied, figuring he was allowed to curse in

front of professors who had tried to kill him. He cursed in front of Lupin after all.

Though I am polyjuiced, so he was technically right.

"Only Harry Potter or his friends would know that. Quirrel, Lockheart, Lupin, Umbridge, none of those were publically reported." Moody explained.

"Then you should have asked about that instead, huh?" Harry asked aggressively, trying to fight the urge to force his fist through Moody's scarred face.

It didn't help that Moody was staring at him, disgust written throughout his expression.

"Don't be an irresponsible fool. I'd hoped you'd learned something about Constant Vigilance last year" Moody said suddenly, his eye spinning around the room.

Harry stood up straight, glaring straight back at the professor.

"What, like the dangerous idiocy you just displayed?" Harry sneered back, thinking he was starting to sound like Snape.

"Exactly like that! Constant vigilance is the only thing that will keep this castle from being overrun with Death Eaters and their like!" Moody practically roared, smashing a hand down on the desk.

"You just tried to hex a student! What if I were a first year? What's safe about that?" Harry shot back, suddenly worried that Moody would perform the same idiocy on an eleven year old. Harry concentrated on his breathing, trying to calm himself down.

"I'm an auror, not an idiot. That was a nonlethal spell." The man growled back.

"But it was dangerous magic, wasn't it?" Harry accused, remembering the magic's glass-like feeling.

"It breaks all the bones in the recipient's hands, so they can't cast anything." Moody replied casually, casting what Harry recognized as advanced privacy spells around the room.

Shite, this man never feels safe, and will do anything for 'constant vigilance'.. Harry thought, eying the quietly distraught professor.

"You would cast that Dark spell on a first-year if you suspected him." Harry commented quietly, doing his best to smother his now-growing anger. He'd stopped having problems controlling his temper in the Dursleys, what was wrong with him now?

"The imposter wouldn't be a first-year, he could be anyone hiding in that skin, prepared to do anything, and you be oblivious, and that attitude is killing people. Anyone could be an enemy in disguise."

"You suspect everyone, and you're going mental. You're going to be killing students." Harry replied hotly, trying to ignore Moody's words. He wanted to hide himself in a pile of books and not eat or sleep until he could stand up and end the entire fucking war once and for all.

"I've never killed a civilian." Moody growled.

"Oh, right. Broke all the bones in their hands, like I don't recognize that as a class 2 hex. You're performing painfully debilitating magic on students now. That's not the kind of constant vigilance I want to learn, thanks."

"Don't you dare talk to me like you know anything about vigilance. You allowed Voldemort to come back and dragged me back into this bloody war. I could kill you just for that, I don't need any bloody polyjuice mistake to help me along. So go back to your dorm and

stop being a reckless fool, Potter, that's all I wanted to say to you. You're a fool, and I hate fools more than anything else. You got one of my people killed by running headlong into a trap like no one would ever think of tricking you, so don't you dare try to warn me about being too vigilant. If you'd learn from my example maybe you wouldn't have brought the Dark Lord back."

"Voldemort would have come back without me." Harry said as quietly and calmly as he could, remembering that horrid night, and hating that Moody would bring it up so callously.

"You should have Detected every bloody rock, tree, book and inkwell you ever laid hands on in expectation of the Dark Lord!" The older man growled, his voice harsh and cruel.

"No one can fucking live like that!" Harry shot back, watching Moody take a drink from his hip flask, just to spit it onto the stone floor.

"I fucking live like that!" Moody answered, shaking the hip flask in the air like some angry old man with a cane. Harry almost snorted, but the sound would have sounded too humorous. He couldn't even imagine anything being funny right then, with Moody blaming him so blatantly. Like Harry didn't have that cruel little piece of his mind doing that for him.

"You failed! You got caught and let Crouch into my school." Harry reminded the man, wanting to spit on the floor but unwilling to look as disgusting as Moody had right then.

"A Death Eater killed one of my friends and came seconds from killing me that night, so don't fucking talk to me about how remorseful I should be now, how careful I should have been and what I should have done in that fucking graveyard, cause trust me, I've thought of that so many times even seeing babies makes me sick." Harry snarled back.



"You'd be dead by now if you weren't the Boy-Who-Lived, how ironic is that?" Said Moody in a gruff tone that expressed no amusement. "It was strategically stupid to rush into a Death Eater ambush to save a single civilian, James' son or no. I'd have left you there to suffer your own mistakes, that's what we should have done. You're young and stupid and fashion yourself a hero, just as Severus has told Dumbledore a dozen times. Maybe the only truthful thing he says and the only time Dumbledore ignores him." Moody growled, before suddenly turning his head and facing the window, as if he'd noticed something there that he had to see.

Harry glanced between him and the clear sky outside the window, trying to figure out what Moody was staring at.

"Bad-mouthing my commander to a civilian. I never thought I'd see the bloody day. Maybe I do have a screw loose, just as they say. Fucking muggle phrase." Moody muttered to himself.

Harry watched the auror, worried and fascinated, suspecting he was watching a man come apart at the seams. He didn't think that even a year before the paranoid man would have voiced his thoughts aloud so carelessly.

"You wouldn't have been too much of a loss, if that Petigrew boy had just killed you. I thought I was done, but you dragged me back into war, don't think I'm ever going to forgive you for that. Next time, don't go off trying to save someone again, next time I really will let you die where you fall. You know nothing about this war, so hide in your tower and study with Ron and that bushy-haired girl."

Is he angry with me for getting caught by Voldemort or for getting Sirius killed?

He's angry at everything. He's just bleedin' insane. Harry answered himself, though he knew Moody was right that he didn't know anything about the war. He had no idea how it was being fought or

where or when, and how was he supposed to help the war effort if he didn't know what the war effort was?

"Teach me then." Harry replied suddenly.

"What?" The man barked.

"Teach me about the war effort, like you were saying, and about the Order, everything you know."

Harry continued, starting to get excited about learning something he knew he needed to know. Still, he wondered how much time he was going to waste proving that he in fact was Harry Potter and had no hidden motivation to kill the insane professor, though he honestly couldn't figure why anyone would.

What is it with Dumbledore's hiring choices?

"You're an idiot. I just told you to stop pretending you're a hero going to go out saving people. A war isn't won by focusing on saving people."

"Then teach me how to win a war!" Harry replied, staring straight into the auror's disjointed gaze.

"What, two minutes ago you decided you want to learn something for once? You've never tried in your life, even when that friend of yours died, Eric Digger or whoever the fuck. Start with learning Constant Vigilance, and stay out of my war." Moody replied.

Callous. Harry thought, carefully not wincing.

"I'm trying now." Harry answered.

"Then you don't know what trying is. Look at you, you haven't worked

a day in your life."

Harry's memory flashed over his childhood at the Dursleys, working in the garden, hungry and sunburned.

"You know nothing about my life. Stop complaining about how little I know, and teach me." Harry ordered, determined.

"You're a child, children make poor soldiers."

"Then I won't be a child when I finish, I can sacrifice that, I've spent all summer trying to sacrifice that. Any other reasons you can find to explain why you shouldn't teach me what you're pissed I don't already know?"

I've got to get him to teach me. He's right, I haven't learned anything yet, not anything.

"Why should I bother? I wasn't stationed here to become your bloody personal trainer." Moody snarled, his Mad-Eye still spinning frantically about the room, looking for hidden intruders.

"Then just tell me what I have to learn!" Harry exclaimed, getting frustrated. "Dumbledore's not going to do it, and then he's going to thrust me into the middle of a battle, expecting me to miraculously save the day. I'm going to have to fight, if you want me to succeed rather than have everyone killed trying to protect me, you better teach me how." Harry answered, trying to think of the next thing to say should Moody still refuse.

"You don't know occlumency. I might as well owl everything I teach you to the Dark Lord with our base names and addressees. Thank you, but I'm no fool." Moody answered.

"I already know occlumency." Harry answered easily. "And you already knew that, didn't you? You legitimized me before you even

told Malfoy and I to stop fighting." Harry was just something Moody would do, like eating with his own utensils and checking for the polyjuiced.

"A smart guess, I suppose." The auror answered grudgingly as he lowered himself into the chair beside his desk.

"So why won't you tell me what I need to do?" Harry asked.

Too whiny.

"What's the real reason?" Harry tried again.

"Why would you want me to teach you? Supposedly I don't know how to be an auror anymore, can't teach you jack." Moody said, and somehow his rough voice sounded like a whine.

"My name's Harry." Harry reminded him, wondering if the man was too far gone to help him any.

"Fucking American phrase." Moody replied, his voice back to its normal growl again.

"What did you mean you don't know how to be an auror anymore?" Harry asked.

"WHERE THE HELL DID YOU HEAR THAT?" Moody roared, standing up again.

"You just said that." Harry replied, unsure whether to laugh or cry at the man whose help he needed.

"See, you're incompetent, you should have expelliarmus'd my wand before I got anywhere near you." The professor barked, though Harry could see that he was flustered. It was strange to see the tough auror show any emotion.

"The point is, you're available and you know what I need to practice, so just insult me, tell me what I suck at so I can study the right things." Harry replied. "And answer the question, what's the real reason you won't?" Harry added, realizing that Moody had successfully avoided the topic.

"I'd rather kill you than teach you, kill all the fools like you that get people killed, with no idea of vigilance." Moody growled, though he put his wand away.

"Well get over it." Harry answered, scoffing at the man's whining. "I've spent the last few months trying to grow up and get better with magic, so I could do something useful in this war. Stop whining that I haven't succeeded yet and help me do it." Harry ordered.

"Here I'll break it to you if no one else will." Moody said as he gracelessly clattered back into his chair. "The Order doesn't need another foolhardy idiot. We all breathed a sigh of relief when Black died without getting anyone else killed. I for one doubted that luck. You're exactly like your godfather, you know that? I don't see James's face and Lily's eyes like everyone else comments. You're all action and no forethought, getting people killed, just like the mutt."

Harry purposely shut out the words, quietly reminding himself that it was all the ramblings of a madman anyway.

"Then teach me to be better!" Harry insisted again, wondering if simply repeating the order would grind Moody down. "Why not teach me to be useful before I get someone else killed? You're hardly helping the war effort more by grading first-year's essays." Harry challenged.

"Watch it, you're insulting an auror." Moody threatened, leering at Harry.

"No, I don't think I am." Harry answered meaningfully, staring into Moody's eyes, following his feeling that Moody had been retired from the auror office for years.

Since he started losing it, probably.

Moody glared back at him for a long while, before scratching at his lower lip aggressively. The gesture reminded Harry of a dog scratching itself.

"Hrmph." Moody grunted, then stood up without a word and headed towards the classroom door.

"Follow me." Moody ordered as he left. Harry rushed to catch up.

"Where are we going?" Harry asked, feeling irritably like a little kid racing after a busy parent.

"The Room of Requirement." Moody replied.

"Wait, what? You decided-"

"Don't hesitate, that's the first rule. There are two lessons when it comes to training and war. One, don't hesitate. In training that means you better be doing something, as fast as you can, all the time. Never stop, never hesitate. Do as I say, when I say, faster than I can say it. In war it means when you see someone to kill, kill him. Don't hesitate. I'm guessing you can guess the second lesson." Moody said as he limped forward.

"Constant vigilance." Harry said with the beginnings of a grin.

"Stop smiling. If you have time to smile you're not working hard enough." Moody growled without turning around to see him. "I'm going to work you so hard you'll never smile again in your life, and then you'll know how hard I've worked in this war. Now get your ass

to the Room of Requirement, ask for the training room and make sure you've run around the room ten times before I get there." Moody ordered.

"Running? I need to learn mag-" Harry started, but Moody whirled around and interrupted him before he got any further.

"Because no wizard is going to defeat the Dark Lord by sitting on a couch all day. You want me to tell you what you have to work on? Well with me, you're either going to come out excellent, or dead, cause I will find something wrong with your sorry ass until you're as scarred and insane as me or a corpse for Lupin to cry over. The Order will be better off either way. Now RUN." Moody growled.

Harry ran.

I need the training room. I need the training room. I need the training room.

The magic there was fascinating, Harry noticed as he entered the Room of Requirement. It was set up as a kind of empty gymnasium. There was magic everywhere in the room, so he could feel everything in the room. It was like he could feel the very air, it was so tainted with the layers and layers of magic that created the room. Harry wanted to forget his plans to train and just sit on the floor studying the magic. He would do that if he ever needed to take a break, Harry decided, though he doubted that would ever happen. He didn't want to take breaks anymore, and he doubted Moody was going to allow it either.

Something broke into his magical awareness, a spell moving fast at his back. Harry spun around and spelled the strongest magical shield he knew. He didn't know when he'd thought to get out his wand, but he knew his trained responses had acted correctly when he saw the hex reflect off the shield and crash a dent into the opposite wall.

Without warning a spell appeared in front of him heading for his chest. Harry cast another shield before he recognized the hex.

shite. His chosen shield was useless against the Perfigo Hamus curse.

Harry tried to dodge out of the way but the hex passed too quickly through his ill-chosen shield and stabbed into his left shoulder. Blood welled up through his shirt almost immediately.

"Ay!" Harry yelled out before he remembered that he was supposed to be silent when in pain. Screaming like that could get him killed. Harry bit his lip to help himself ignore the pain pulsing into his shoulder as he felt a stinging hex headed towards him.

It was then that Harry realized that no one was in the Room of Requirement with him, that no one was attacking him. He had asked the room for a place to train his magic, and it had given it to him.

Harry felt a spell he didn't recognize fly at him and pulled up a strong magical shield as quickly as he could spell it. He got lucky and the curse dissipated against his magic.

He could feel all the magic in the room, so he knew when a spell was headed at him, though apparently the Room of Requirement knew spells that he didn't.

There were dozens of magical shields to choose from every time he had to protect himself. The "strongest" ones could protect him from almost any spell, but also took longest to cast. There were some spells designed specifically to pass through the common shields, and he needed to know the specific shields to cast against them. Protego was a very good balance between the strength of the shield and the casting speed, but Harry preferred Contego, which was stronger. He'd become adapt enough at the Contego shield's complicated



wand-motion necessary that he could cast the charm almost as quickly as the easier shield spells.

Despite his three months of studying and practice, Harry found himself bleeding from multiple wounds within minutes. He didn't have the time to heal himself in between casting shielding charms, despite knowing books full of spells to help him. Still, Harry kept going, knowing that once he improved he'd have the time to heal himself. For now, he'd bleed

The Room of Requirement had created the perfect training room for him. It threw spells at him at just over his capacity to shield, so he was pushed to shield against some spells and dodge the rest. The hexes that hit him were always painful, and sometimes sent him sprawling over the hard floor, but never completely incapacitated him. All he had to do was keep up with everything. When hit he had to move fastest rather than slow down from the pain. He had to counterspell his Jelly-Legs or whatever effects a hex had given him, roll out of the way of whatever magic he felt heading towards him and get back on his feet, ready to shield again. He'd only just learned the maneuver and gotten back on his feet when Moody came in.

"Why aren't you running, boy?" Moody asked angrily as he came in.

"Spells." Harry gasped out, creating a shield in time to block the next spell heading towards him. Another leg-locker curse, Harry felt. "Too fast." Harry continued, recognizing the next spell that was heading towards him and working to cast a counter curse.

"Well you have to be faster. You should always be moving while you fight. Give your opponent a more difficult target. Once you learn to move and fight at the same time, you won't have to waste your time shielding nearly as often. Dodging will also be easier, because you will have momentum on your side. Now, RUN." Moody ordered.

Harry gasped out a few breaths, trying to get enough energy to obey,

but another spell grazed his arm and knocked the wind out of his lungs. Harry coughed, and started to walk. He didn't have time to catch his breath, and he wasn't supposed to, Harry realized. He just had to obey, and run, and block the spells, until Moody told him to stop.

He was drenched sweat and blood within an hour, but the spells didn't stop, so neither could he. It was perfect.

Three hours later, he'd learned that if he ran, and dodged his spells that way, he had time to heal himself. Within a half-hour he had all of his scratches and burns healed and painless, and once he was completely whole again, Moody ordered him to stop, and told the Room to stop sending spells.

Harry collapsed on the floor, gasping. His lungs and heart burned and threatened to pulse their way out of his chest wall. His entire body ached.

"Get up and walk around the room a dozen times. When you're done, stretch and then do fifty sit ups as punishment for not running when I told you to the first time." Moody ordered, again before Harry had gotten his breath back.

Damn him, damn him, damn him. Harry thought as he pulled his body back to his throbbing feet, and began to jog. His vision was blurry, and he felt nauseated, but he knew better than to stop. If he fainted, then he'd get a couple of seconds of undeserved rest, otherwise, he'd keep going. Harry desperately wished that he would faint, despite the time it would waste, but somehow he managed to get through the routine and punishment. By the time he'd finished, Moody was gone.

Harry suspected Moody wasn't going to come back until Harry had mastered it.

Harry didn't think he'd ever felt so tired in his life. Either way, it wasn't 12:00 AM yet: he still had hours of work to do before he could rest. Harry groaned, and pulled himself toward the Room of Requirement's door.

He returned to his books, grateful that at least he could sit down. He felt himself melt into the uncomfortable library chair and pulled his books to him. He set his magical alarm to go off in an hour, knowing he was tired enough to forget to take his polyjuice if he wasn't careful.

He woke to his alarm buzzing angrily in front of him. Harry yelped and canceled the charm, drawing the attention of a group of Hufflepuff students sitting at a library table beside him.

"Fucking bugs." Harry grumbled loudly, picking up a book that slid to the floor when he jerked awake.

I fell asleep. Harry understood, cursing silently and sipping from his polyjuice flask.

Harry pushed his foot between his chair and the table leg, hoping the pain would keep him awake for the three hours before he had to go to dinner. He reset his polyjuice alarm and promised himself he'd be awake the next time it rang.

He was ready to collapse by the time he made it into the Great Hall. Harry fell onto the Gryffindor bench and served himself. Hedwig was waiting there for him, sitting on top of a small pile of letters. The first was a note in Dumbledore's thin, slanting writing, requesting that they begin their private lessons that Saturday, and giving him the password 'Acid Pops'. The others were detention slips for missing Potions and his 'remedial potions lesson' the day before. Harry thanked Hedwig with a few bites of his dinner, and told her to return to the owlery. She glared at him, but left. He didn't bother looking up to the staff table for Snape, the man would either be pointedly

ignoring him, or glaring at him, and he didn't much care which. Snape had never told him when he had to go to the 'remedial potions lesson' that he'd apparently missed, which angered him, but as he'd already decided not to go to it, Harry figured it didn't matter either way. Snape could hate him all he wanted for all he cared, he had the 'most powerful wizard of all time' to destroy, what did Professor Snape matter?

"Harry, good you're here. I've been waiting to speak to you all day." Hermione greeted as she sank onto the bench across from him.

"Yeah, Harry, where have you been?" Ron added as he sat down beside her. "Malfoy almost cried when he didn't see you in Potions. He glared at our table the entire class, almost put rat brains into his potion before stirring. Snape had to physically stop him from exploding the whole room, it was hilarious."

Harry looked up at them both, wishing they'd stop speaking so loudly. The whole room was shouting.

"I was studying. Dumbledore's excused me from a few classes to give me private lessons." Harry answered between yawns, passing his friends the note Hedwig had brought him.

"Blimey...Private lessons with Dumbledore?" said Ron, looking impressed. "That's 'cause of You-Know-Who, right?" Ron glanced suspiciously at the Griffindors eating nearby.

"Yeah." Harry answered, serving himself more to eat. His dizziness was gone; now he was starving.

They ate in silence for a while, for which Harry was grateful. The whole room sounded too loud to him. Harry fought to keep himself from covering his ears and folding himself onto the table to sleep.

"Well, anyway." Started Hermione once the dessert trays arrived.

"Where on earth did you find a copy of Transfiguration, An Advanced Study by J. E. Flewelling?" she asked, suddenly sounding just as excited as she had in their Defense class.

"Oy, was that what you were freaking out about before?" Ron interrupted, pointing his fork at her.

"Ron, I've been looking for Flewelling's book for ages. It's supposed to be the best resource out there about full-body defensive magic. It was written in 1986, so it's not even that old, but James Flewelling was a real genius. Well, I guess I can't say he was a genius, I mean he's still alive but he emigrated out of England during the first war." She explained hurriedly, before continuing on about the author's life story.

Harry carefully finished eating and put his bare hand on the table's surface, though even the thought of studying the room's wards made him want to groan and hide in his bed.

"Uh...you're losing us Hermione." Ron interrupted when she took a breath to breathe.

"Yeah, sorry." She finished. "But Harry, where did you find it?"

Harry looked up from his contemplation of the table's spells.

"Knockturn Alley." He answered.

"You bought something in Knockturn Alley?" Ron asked, his eyes wide with something resembling fear. "Blimey, mate"

"It's just a street, Ron." Harry said.

When did they start sounding so young to me?

"Are you alright, Harry?" Hermione asked with a small frown.

"You've asked that before." Harry replied, turning on the bench to fish in his bag for the Anderling text. He'd felt some kind of slippery magic in the dining utensils.

Anti-bacteria wards, Harry realized, before he'd even found his Charms book. Magic seemed to just tell him what it did, sometimes, when he was concentrating enough.

"He's not hearing ya', Herm." Ron's voice caught his attention as he summoned a book from his dorm that was sure to have information on anti-bacteria charms. It was one of his favorite new ways of studying, to memorize everything he could about the magic he encountered. Hopefully some day he'd be able to really understand what he was feeling every time he touched something in the magical world.

I wished I'd kept my head and felt the spell Moody sent at me. Harry mentally kicked himself. He'd never felt active offensive magic, and he wondered what he could learn from that. The spells the Room of Requirement sent at him were all jumbled up with the magic of the room itself. Harry sighed, annoyed at himself for missing the opportunity, though the thought of getting anymore spells thrown at him that day forced him to fight off another bout of nausea.

"Harry?" Hermione called, sounding hurt.

"Yeah?" Harry looked up, grateful for the distraction.

"Did you hear anything I just said?" She asked.

"Er...no." Harry replied awkwardly.

Don't have time to be awkward. Harry reminded himself. He was supposed to end the conversation as quickly as possible, and return to his work with the Hogwarts's wards.

"She was saying you look bloody awful. Sick 'n shite." Ron offered.

"That's hardly the way I said it!" Hermione gasped out.

"Nah, it's probably true. I've been feeling sick recently, but honestly I can't say more about it than that, Dumbledore, you know." Harry replied, looking carefully contrite and trying to hide how his insides were churning at the thought of lying to them.

I will sacrifice anything.

"Oh have you started with the private lessons already?" Asked Ron quietly.

"Sorry guys, I've actually got a lot to study. I'll see you in Transfiguration class, alright?" Harry pushed his book back into his bag, and started to stand.

Hermione quickly snapped a hand out and grabbed his.

"Don't leave, Harry, we won't talk about it, we promise." She pleaded.

"Yeah, mate." Ron agreed, apparently not noticing that she'd already spoken for him. Harry glanced between the two of them, wondering why Ron wasn't reacting. Usually Ron hated being spoken for, it reminded him of being shadowed by his older brothers.

"Alright." Harry pretended to agree grudgingly.

"Awesome." Hermione answered with a pacifying smile, the conversation officially changed.

When did I get good at manipulating them? I never even needed to lie outright.

'Lying is for those too stupid to manipulate.' Harry thought, remembering the quote from somewhere, though he couldn't remember who had said it. Malfoy, maybe. It sounded like him, and was definitely a Slytherin phrase. Somehow Harry couldn't be offended by it anymore: he preferred manipulation to lying; it didn't feel as wrong to string truthful phrases together and let his friends understand what they would. It felt like he wasn't pushing them out of his life quite as much, and he suspected he was far less likely to get caught that way too.

"Er...anyway, we have Herbology before Transfig tomorrow, so we'll see you there first." Ron added, obviously trying to change the subject, and failing spectacularly.

"No, I've been excused from that one, same reason, studying." Harry answered truthfully.

"We'll see you first in breakfast, anyway." Hermione added, sounding forcedly cheerful.

"Hey, guys." Ginny said, sitting down to join them.

"Hi Ginny!" Hermione greeted over-enthusiastically. Harry closed his eyes and tried not to grin.

"Ginny, you're supposed to sit with your own friends." Ron complained loudly.

"Sorry to break this to you, Ronnikins, but Harry and Hermione are my own friends." Ginny responded, leaning over the table to pat Ron's hand in a sarcastic display of sympathy.

"I hate my family." Ron growled between clenched teeth.

"And we are stricken to hear that." Ginny responded in the same



sympathetic tone as before, though she was openly grinning now.

"This is why Fred and George won't mess with her. She's mental." Ron whined, looking helplessly at Harry.

"Well, anyway, when are you going to hold Quidditch tryouts, Harry?" Ginny asked, turning from Ron. Ron turned in his seat to face Harry fully, his entire expression lighting up.

Does every subject change have to lead back to my damn training?

"I'm not going to be playing Quidditch this year, same reason." Harry said, glancing at them all before staring at his plate, knowing he was dropping a bomb on his entire house.

Harry looked up to see Ron and Ginny both gaping at him in overt horror.

"Why the hell not?" Ginny shot out.

"Not-? But? You're the best seeker Griffindor's had in ages!" Ron exclaimed.

"Not anymore." Harry answered, glancing between the two of them. "I've really got to learn magic this year. You know how every year it was like we only learned one really useful spell? Voldemort's studied magic for years, he was a bloody genius, and every day that I've still not surpassed and killed him, the worse the war gets."

"Harry, the Death Eater raids are not your fault. For heaven's sake we're 16, the war started in the 40s." Hermione insisted.

"I never said they were." Harry growled, and willed his temper to shut up and leave him alone. He was too tired to be angry with her.

Harry heard his magical alarm go off suddenly, telling him to drink his

polyjuice again. He almost groaned aloud at the thought of bending beneath the table to get his flask from his bookbag. He'd be asleep as soon as he allowed his chin to nod, Harry knew, and took out his wand, though he felt pathetic doing it.

He silently accio'd his flask into his hand as subtly as he could, and drank a small sip of the tasteless stuff.

"And the flask?" Asked Dean Thomas from where he'd sat across from Ginny. Harry glanced up as he replaced the flask's top.

"Constant Vigilance." Harry replied in as close an impression to Moody's warning growl as he could make, shaking the flask wildly. After the years hearing the mantra, he'd become adept at it. All the Griffindors sitting nearby laughed, and Harry happily watched as the subject was dropped entirely as a small gag.

Ron and Hermione beamed at him, obviously reconvinced that he had a personality beneath all his new studying habits. Harry struggled not to be annoyed at them for worrying so much.

"Well, on a new subject, Ron and I almost had our explode before Snape got there." Hermione said, sounding instantly annoyed.

"Blimey Hermione, lay off. I needed to fetch some more gerasnail bones, what was I supposed to do, accio them? Snape would have killed me." Ron argued back.

"You can't use oscillatory motion spells to stir potions because the magic would interfere. Honestly Ron, Snape has said that a dozen times!" Hermione scolded.

Ron stared at Harry, widening his eyes helplessly. 'Help me' He mouthed.

"That doesn't actually make any sense, Hermione." Harry said quietly,

glancing at her. She turned to him, ready to argue and he held up a hand. "Look, Snape's probably right that oscillatory motion spells can't be used to stir potions but that can't be why. All underage wands have Ministry spells cast on them that don't interfere with elementary potionwork because they are all at very least protected with first class M.I warding spells. I don't know anything about potions, but I know enough to say that a low grade oscillation spell, no offense Ron, would not be strong enough to get past that warding."

Ron and Hermione were staring at him.

Did I seriously not know that last year? We must have been taught something about that in class.

"Maybe Snape was just being a greasy git and wanted to punish Ron." Harry finished. "Anyway, I really do have to go. See you, guys." Harry said quietly, glancing at his three friends as he stood from the Gryffindor bench, doing his best not to groan aloud as he forced himself to move.

He was exhausted and in pain, and his friends were still staring at him as he turned to leave. He wanted to go to bed.

Harry stumbled through the castle trying to wake himself back up as he yawned his way up to Gryffindor tower.

Fucking steps. There's gotta be a better way to get up here than walking. Best wizarding school in England can't even make a bleeding escalator?

Harry didn't know how he managed to stay awake for his studying that night.

Harry sobbed out in pain as he woke the next morning. His entire body throbbed with his pulse, aching more constantly than anything he'd ever felt.

He hissed as he sat up, desperate to get to his now cramping leg, just to make that horridly tight pain stop. He pulled back on his toes, tugging them toward his knee until the cramp released.

"Oh, god." Harry breathed as he lay back down again.

Harry cast pain-repressing spells over his body. He didn't even try to reach for his wand until he felt the aches lessen in his arms.

God bless wandless magic. Harry thought, rubbing a hand over the skin on his hand. He'd healed everything the Room of Requirement had wounded him with the night before, and the pain-repressing spells dealt with his muscle aches, but the recently healed skin ached and itched.

He couldn't magically repress the ache left over from a healing spell, he'd learned that truth months before and had gotten used to dealing with some constant pain, but this was different. He itched.

Harry scourgified himself as soon as he could reliably hold his wand, and for once was almost pleased with the skin-deep sting of it.

The itch died beneath it, and Harry decided he much preferred the pain. His itch was gone completely.

Next came the polyjuice potion. Harry remembered at the last minute to cast silencio over his bed, so at least this time he didn't have to be silent as he writhed his way into a 'healthy' body.

Harry dressed in his student robes, knowing he was facing another training session that afternoon. For once he was grateful for the uniform black school robes. Black hid blood stains better than any

color. He'd known that since he was six.

Harry crept out of the dorm with his books for the day and climbed down to the common room. He wanted to go to the library; Dumbledore had offered him unrestricted access to the books there, but he wanted to earn unrestricted access. He'd spent weeks studying warding spells, how to detect them and how to dispel them, and he wanted to practice. What better way was there than crack the wards around a library at 4 in the morning?

Harry had to snap his teeth closed to avoid yelping when he touched the portrait door. Magic had blazed against him at the touch, all safe and threatening and somehow...round.

Of course it's warded. Harry thought, kicking himself for his stupidity. All of the Hogwarts surfaces practically quivered with the magical power embedded in them, of course there was something better than a portrait's password guarding the student's dormitory.

I wonder how Sirius got through this? Harry thought, placing his open palm against the portrait door and concentrating on the power there. He couldn't help grimacing over the time the 'convict' had snuck through with Neville's list of passwords.

Maybe that's why Dumbledore was so spooked. Even though Sirius didn't hurt anyone, he'd managed to get through the portrait's magic. I bet this ward was easy for the three Marauders. Probably found out about it in first year.

Harry frowned at his own incompetence years before but shook it off, and continued examining the spell.

Definitely an alarm spell. Harry identified, picking the magic out easily. It was designed to send an alarm to someone every time the door was opened between midnight and 5:00 AM, though Harry couldn't learn more than that from its magic. Feeling the number 5:00 AM was

a strange enough sensation in itself.

So while we're supposed to be in curfew, this is activated, hence people getting caught for sneaking out. Harry concluded, thinking over all the times that Snape had 'happened' to be out lurking in the halls at night.

Harry sat down against the dormitory door, keeping his hand against the magicked wood, and settled down to concentrate on the wards for the few hours before breakfast. He'd found something better than library wards to study with.

"Rough night?" A voice interrupted his concentration. It was loud in contrast to Harry's silent night. Harry pulled his hand away from the door's magic and saw that indeed, night was over, and there was light streaming in through the tower windows. Harry blessed his alarms that had kept him taking his polyjuice throughout the night.

Nothing had captured his attention enough to help him watch the time.

The Griffindor wards were fascinating, and, he believed, tied into the wards over the entire castle. If he could learn to pass unhindered in and out of his bedroom, he'd probably have enough skill to manage leaving the castle entirely, and of course from there, go anywhere in the world. Harry grinned at the thought. He was not setting himself to any kind of easy task, but the world worked better for him that way.

Harry's smile melted as he realized that the Hogwart's walls all looked like the bars of a cage now. It didn't matter if he ran away into the muggle world, until he broke those wards and was able to get out of Hogwarts without help, he'd never feel truly freed.

"Er...Harry?" The voice interrupted his thoughts again.

Harry remembered his social graces this time, and looked up.

Seamus Finnegan was peering down at him, grinning lazily.

And then Harry realized that he was crumpled on the floor beside the common room portrait hole, surrounded by opened books.

"God I hate hangovers." Harry grumbled, staring at the books with faked confusion, building on what Seamus would have already guessed.

"Don't I know it." Seamus grinned, watching as Harry carefully packed his books back into his bag.

"No one questions that one." Harry replied, glancing meaningfully at the couch by the fire.

Seamus had never been able to entirely live down having a bunch of first-years find him lying upside down over the back of the couch, drooling on the red and gold pillows.

"Hey, you're hardly in a position to laugh." Seamus replied with a grin, throwing out a hand to pull him up.

"Fair point." Harry replied, accepting the help and stepping aside to let the other boy out of the portrait first.

"See you in Herbology. I'm off to the library for that bloody Potions essay." Seamus said as he left.

Oh yeah, I skipped Potions yesterday. Harry realized, remembering that his time with Moody had passed over the entire double potions class. It seemed strange to think he'd been half-dead in the Room of Requirement while other Gryffindors were suffering in an entirely different way. It made him feel even more separate from his class, to think of Seamus having to write a Potions essay he hadn't even heard about. It was even stranger to think that he was planning on training in the Room of Requirement that time every day for the entire

year, or until it killed him anyway.

Maybe I'll die without ever taking another class with Snape, Harry thought, unsure whether to feel grim about the thought or celebrate it like Ron would.

It was depressing enough to think he'd just woken up and had already lied and played his part of the normal, happy teenager. Acting happy should have no place in training for war. Hopefully the Order would understand that, when he was strong enough to join them, because he highly doubted that he'd be a happy man on the day he became a useful one. It was a sobering thought, Harry noted, gathering his books together.

He decided to think about three dimensional complete irregular-space encompassing protection spells instead, and headed for the library.

Defense class that morning passed quickly. Harry sat in the back and studied while the rest of the class split into pairs to continue with silent magic. Harry already preferred to practice in private. He didn't want to explain every spell he did to curious onlookers, and he hated being stared at. It happened enough without his 'sudden' improvement with magic.

He thought Moody either didn't notice or had chosen not to mention that he was reading until halfway through class when Moody tossed a battered coverless paper-back book onto his desk.

"Learn this" Moody ordered, and limped back to his chair, where he was spending the class casting protection spells over every surface of his workspace. Harry watched the man open one of his drawers, and flinch before casting a dozen charms, from what Harry recognized as advanced booby traps to advanced charms like temporary anti-apparation wards, as if the entire castle wasn't warded with both.



If they can get into this room, they can get into that desk. Harry thought, and wondered if part of Moody knew that too. Perhaps that was why the man looked so desperate with each successive charm he cast.

Is he worried that someone is going to apparate into his desk? Harry thought, grimacing to himself as he flipped open the paperback.

The book was excellent, and Harry found himself nodding contentedly to himself as he memorized spell after spell. For once he had a book that was well organized, clearly written, and contained material he hadn't already seen in a half-dozen other Defense texts. He carried it through the halls as he moved from the Defense classroom over to McGonagall's transfiguration class, reading as he went.

The paperback was halfway between a list of fighting spells, and a text on magical theory. Each successive spell's magical properties were explained and balanced against the properties of the previous spell, so in learning about long range eviscerating hexes, he learned both the fact that the spell was slow, and the reason the magic didn't move as quickly through the air, as well as a shorter, and faster, alternate.

An elbow prodding into his side distracted him long enough to look up from it, and Harry glared at whoever was poking at him. He found himself glaring at the entire class, which had turned around to stare at him. By the Slytherin's collective smirk, Harry assumed McGonagall had called him on not paying attention.

"She asked if you're excused from Transfiguration." Ron whispered urgently, clearly thinking the question was rhetorical.

Harry looked up at his professor, expecting her sharp gaze, and saw her looking back at him passively.

"No, Professor." Harry answered, guessing then that McGonagall had already heard about his Herbology and Astrology classes.

"Then why did you think it was acceptable to be reading during my class?" She asked icily, starting to turn back to the chalk board in front of them.

Definitely a rhetorical question now. Harry thought.

"I've already learned 6th year three dimensional B. transfigurations, professor." Harry answered anyway, naming the trimester's lesson. McGonagall turned back to him and raised her eyebrows.

"I spent the summer studying, Ma'am." Harry continued, remembering how she'd cupped his shoulder just the morning before. He didn't want to disappoint her like what had happened with Lupin. He'd do it if necessary, but he didn't think there was any reason to here.

Harry carefully tore a strip from his stack of parchment and crumpled it into a ball to hold in an open fist in front of him. He looked up to make sure Professor McGonagall was watching him. All he had to do was point his wand, and concentrate on the incantation word mutare, and open his palm. He'd practiced the trick the night before, and he knew that if he'd mastered it when he was barely able to keep from falling asleep, he'd definitely be able to do it now. Harry opened his hand and presented a perfectly working muggle watch to McGonagall.

A wide-eyed McGonagall took the watch from his open hand and glanced at it before handing it back, no doubt checking that its miniscule hands moved correctly. Harry didn't bother double checking; he'd felt the magic fit the metal into gears and hands and already knew they'd come out perfectly.

"Come to breakfast tomorrow, Mr. Potter, I'll give you a schedule reassigning you to my advanced level class. For now, you make take this time as a study period. You may go." McGonagall ordered gently.

Harry nodded to her, and grabbed his bag and paperback.

"May I make a muggle timekeeper and go too?" whined Draco's voice from the Slytherin side of the room. Harry looked over and saw Draco dangling a golden watch between two fingers. It looked like a Rolex, though Draco held it disgustedly like a young girl with a dead bug.

Did he make that as quickly as I did?, Harry asked, kicking himself. He had to be careful not to get complacent, just because he'd improved didn't mean much, especially after how incompetent with magic he'd been before.

"You may discuss it with me after class, Mr. Malfoy." Harry heard McGonagall reply as he left the room.

"Kreacher." Harry called firmly when his lunch alarm pulled him out of his book. He preferred to call Dobby, but he wanted to see how his house-elf was faring. He was considering casting a few more alarms for himself, to remind him to check up on the miserable being.

Kreacher popped up beside him looking sullen and angry. Still, Harry saw that there was a well-made toga now wrapped around his small form.

"Good job on the clothing. Please bring me lunch, let another house-elf prepare it, don't touch it or add anything to it, and bring it here as quickly as possible." Harry ordered carefully, hoping to head off any attempts at sabotage the elf could come up with, and wondering if he was still giving the traitor too much freedom.

Harry received his meal with thanks, though it consisted of haggus,

tripe, caviare, and what looked like pickled cow's ear.

Right. Lunch. Clever little nasty thing, isn't he? Harry thought, looking at his distasteful meal.

"Dobby." Harry called, glad to ask for the far more pleasant elf.

"Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby greeted happily when he appeared, already bowing.

"Could you please take this meal back to the kitchens and bring me something for lunch?" Harry asked, gratefully handing the plate off to the elf.

Dobby disappeared with a crack and returned in less than a second with a freshly cooked meal.

Do they keep freshly cooked meals already prepared somehow? Harry wondered before returning to his book.

He finished the paperback by the end of the Transfiguration class session, and headed for the Room of Requirement while his classmates herded past him towards the Great Hall for lunch. He knew (though it made him wince just to think about) that he had to practice in the training room as much as possible, until he could dodge or block every spell the room could send at him.

He was sweaty and tired before he even arrived at the seventh floor, and once inside, he got hit with twice as many spells as the day before. Every shield he chose seemed to be the wrong one, or too late, and he couldn't get up the speed to dive under spells anymore, and every time he did hit the floor it seemed to take him twice as much time to get back on his feet. He lost count of the times spells got past his shields to slap or punch or stab him, and he ended up taking three spells in a row to give himself time to cast his three strongest shields around himself. He held them up wandlessly, and

allowed himself to fall onto his bruised knees while he cast healing spells around himself. He felt each spell as it hit his wall of shields, and identified many of them, but he couldn't be arsed to concentrate on the rest. He wasn't even going to be able to hold his shield up for long.

Fuck this war, fuck this war, fuck this war, Harry chanted silently as he cast his last healing spells and watched the skin on his arm knit itself over a bleeding wound.

Harry considered staying in his shielded space until he'd caught his breath, but discarded the idea immediately. He knew he'd spend the rest of his day regretting the decision terribly, and wondering how much more he would have learned if he'd pushed himself like he should have. .

He started running, and kept his shields around himself until he'd made it around the entire room twice to prove it to himself that he could, before dropping them carefully, and easily shielding against the coming knife-wound spell.

Harry was glad he was alone; it allowed him to fail in private. He was still achy and exhausted from the day before, and still got hit by twice as many spells as the day before. He stopped when his dinner alarm sounded.

He healed himself as best as he could, and scurgified the itch away, magically replacing his stained robes with a clean pair from the dormitory.

Pain was good, Harry told himself as he limped out. His muscles and joints protested every time he moved, and as much as he tried, he couldn't get his body to stop shaking, but he could almost get himself to appreciate that. When he was physically unable to work any harder, he knew he was studying hard enough, which was a blessing like none other. He could breathe when he felt that way, and Harry

didn't know how he'd ever survived without being in pain.

By Saturday Hogwarts had become its own exhausting routine. Harry woke at 4:00 and spent the morning studying the Common Room's wards. He studied whatever book Moody handed him through Defense class, and spent Advanced Transfigurations with Hermione and Luna, working on an advanced shielding spell that required transfigurative magic while they were studying minute transfiguration. He spent his meals working on the Great Hall's warding magic, his afternoons in the Room of Requirement, and his nights practicing wandless casting. By the end of the week he was ready to cry for need of sleep, and sing at the thought of how much he'd improved at all he'd been doing.

Harry got to the training room by 4:20 AM on Saturday.

He forced himself to physically drill his shielding for two hours before he created a dome of safety from the spells, and wandlessly held up the temporary wards as he took a break to practice self-transfiguration, charms, offensive magic, occlumency, and magical detection. The Room of Requirement was the perfect place to learn, because he could feel everything in the room, and so, with the shields held around him, he could examine each of the spells the room sent at him mixed into the magic of the room itself. If his concentration ever broke, he got a painful reminder of why he needed to devote some of his magic to keeping his bubble of safety up around him.

By the time he had to go to Dumbledore's requested 'private lesson', he was shaking with exhaustion, and looking forward to the chance to stop training, even if it was only to be for a few hours. He doubted the headmaster was going to give him any real magical training, whether or not he desperately needed it.

Harry groaned as he made his way up the moving steps to the seventh-floor corridor. The gargoyle guarding Dumbledore's office

lept aside as Harry gave the password, and the wall behind it slid apart to reveal a moving spiral stone staircase. Harry stepped onto it carefully, and placed a hand along the moving wall to feel at the spells as he was carried in smooth circles up to Dumbledore's office door.

There, they do have magical elevators. Why doesn't Hogwarts bloody use them? Harry thought, wishing he had time to sit by the staircase and study its magic. Instead, Harry stepped away from the magic and knocked on the door in front of him.

"Come in," called Dumbledore's voice from within.

"Good evening, sir." said Harry, quietly closing the door behind him.

"Ah, good evening, Harry. Sit down, you look tired." said Dumbledore, smiling. "I've hope you've had an enjoyable first week back at school?"

"Yes, thank you, sir." Harry replied, carefully not wincing as he lowered himself into one of the comfortable seats before Dumbledore's desk.

"You must have been busy, a detention under your belt already?" He chastised lightly.

I skip a week of classes and five detentions, and that's probably all I'll hear about it. Harry thought, happy that he wasn't about to hear a long lecture, but unsure what he thought about the Headmaster's light, and unfair, attitude toward him. Fred and George had been threatened with suspension for less, they'd at least always gone to their detentions.

"Yes, sir." was all Harry said aloud.

"I have arranged with Professor Snape that you will do your detention

next Saturday instead."

I had a detention today? Oh, who knew.

"Thank you, sir." Harry replied politely, though he started openly looking around for an indication of what Dumbledore was planning to do with their private lessons, hoping that the headmaster would recognize the hint that he wanted to get started. It did not look as though Dumbledore cleared a space for dueling practice, though Harry didn't pretend to be surprised about that.

"So, Harry," started Dumbledore finally. "You have been wondering, I am sure, what I have planned for you during these – for want of a better word – lessons?"

Harry nodded.

"Well, I have decided that it is time, now that you know what prompted Lord Voldemort to try and kill you fifteen years ago, for you to be given certain information."

Harry carefully checked to make sure that his face was perfectly blank, before meeting Dumbledore's gaze. He pushed all of his concentration into his occlumency, trusting his magical detection to tell him if Dumbledore tried to legitimize him. He knew he wouldn't be able to keep the headmaster out of his thoughts, but he wasn't going to spend this entire meeting staring at his feet.

"What do you mean by 'certain information' sir?" Harry asked quietly, trying not to get angry too quickly.

"At the end of your last term I told you everything I know. From this point forth, we shall be leaving the firm foundations of fact and journeying together through the murky marshes of memory into thickets of wildest guesswork. From here on in, Harry, I may be as woefully wrong as Humphrey Belcher, who believed the time was



ripe for a cheese cauldron." Dumbledore answered him.

Harry struggled not to stand up and walk out at the ridiculous speech that reminded him so much of Trelawny's 'murkey marshes of memory'. He reminded himself that Dumbledore had information that he needed, and stayed in his seat, though even exhausted, he'd have much preferred to run back to the Room of Requirement and continue on his training regimen.

"Remember though, I make mistakes like the next man. In fact, being – forgive me – rather cleverer than most men, my mistakes tend to be correspondingly huger."

I hope to tell. Hell, literally, I hope to survive to speak of them.

Harry waited silently, turning in his seat to watch as Dumbledore got to his feet and walked around the desk to open the cabinet beside the door and return with a familiar shallow stone basin etched with odd markings around its rim.

"If you will stand, Harry." Dumbledore said as he set the Pensieve on the desk in front of them.

"What are we going to see?" Harry asked as he obeyed.

"We're going on a trip down Bob Ogden's memory lane," said Dumbledore, pulling out a crystal bottle containing a swirling silvery-white substance from his pocket.

"Whose, sir?" Harry asked, though Dumbledore had known he wouldn't know. He hated this back-and-forth game Dumbledore played in all of their conversations. He used to enjoy it, before it made him feel involved, but now he recognized how much time it wasted, and he found himself struggling to keep his face blank as he played Dumbledore's game.

"He was employed by the Department of Magical Law Enforcement," said Dumbledore. "He died some time ago, but not before I had tracked him down and persuaded him to confide these recollections to me. We are about to accompany him on a visit he made in the course of his duties." Dumbledore said as he struggled to pull out the stopper from the crystal bottle despite his injured hand.

"Shall I, sir?" Harry offered, lifting a hand from his side slightly to take the stopper if Dumbledore handed it to him.

"No matter, Harry." Dumbledore pointed his wand at the bottle and the cork flew out.

Harry considered the blackened fingers with a mixture of revulsion and respect before watching Dumbledore tip the silvery contents of the bottle into the Pensieve.

It was like seeing magic, Harry thought, looking down at the swirling contents that were so obviously neither liquid nor gas.

"After you," said Dumbledore, gesturing to the bowl.

Harry bent forward and plunged his face into the silvery substance. He felt his feet leave the office floor, and concentrated on the amazing beauty of the magic he felt around him before he fell into a scene of blazing sunlight. Before his eyes had adjusted, Dumbledore had landed beside him, and they were walking off together after a plump distinctly wizard-looking man.

Harry didn't have time to think much while he watched the whole scene unfold. He wished Dumbledore had given him more of an explication of what he was about to see before they'd jumped into the scene. He felt like he'd just walked into a theater halfway through a movie and was stuck trying to figure out who was the good guy and who was bad right before the film's climax.

Not that it was all that hard to tell. As Harry watched, Ogden tried to protect the obviously abused girl in the home they entered, while Gaunt had come moments from strangling his own daughter for looking at a muggle boy. Guant was apparently the last decedent of Slytherin, and Harry wondered if Dumbledore had found someone to translate the memory from the parseltongue the entire Guant men spoke in, or if that was why he'd been invited to see the scene. First though...

"What happened to the girl in the cottage?" Harry had to ask, as Dumbledore walked aroundt he room lighting extra lamps with a flick of his wand. "Merope." Harry clarified.

"Oh, she survived." said Dumbledore as he reseated himself behind his desk and gestured for Harry to sit down too. "Ogden Apparated back to the Ministry and returned with reinforcements within fifteen minutes. Morfin and his father attempted to fight, but both were overpowered, removed from the cottage and subsequently convicted by the Wizengamot. Morfin, who already had a record of Muggle attacks, was sentenced to three years in Azkaban. Marvolo, who had injured several Ministry employees in addition to Ogden, received six months in a different prison."

Marvolo? Harry thought, recognizing the name and remembering that Tom Marvolo Riddle had also called himself the 'last decendent of Slytherin'. A muggle had passed by the window during Ogden's visit. 'Tom', he'd been called, and Merope had apparently been watching him..

"So that was Voldemort's grandfather then." Harry concluded, thinking over the obviously terrified girl.

"Well thought, yes. The Gaunt family was noted for a vein of instability and violence that flourished through the generations due to their habit of marrying their own cousins. Lack of sense coupled with a great liking for grandeur meant that the family gold was

squandered several generations before Marvolo was born. He, as you saw, was left in squalor and poverty, with a very nasty temper, a fantastic amount of arrogance and pride, and a couple of family heirlooms that he treasured just as much as his son, and rather more than his daughter."

"So Merope Gaunt and Tom Riddle. And they ended up married?" Harry said to himself in disbelief, unable to imagine two people less likely to fall in love. Well...Ron and Draco were a good bet, but at least one wasn't half-broken.

"I think you are forgetting," said Dumbledore, "that Merope was a witch."

"Merope imperio'd him?" Harry asked incredulously, hoping he was wrong.

"Very good, but I do not believe so. Personally I am inclined to think that she used a love potion. I am sure it would have seemed more romantic to her, and I do not think it would have been very difficult, some hot day, when Riddle was riding alone, to persuade him to take a drink of water. In any case, within a few months of the scene we have just witnessed, the village of Little Hangleton enjoyed a tremendous scandal. You can imagine the gossip it caused when the squire's son ran off with the tramp's daughter, Merope."

"Sir, why did you show me this, wouldn't it have been faster just to tell me what parts of it are necessary to know?" Harry asked, trying to think if any of it could actually be considered necessary knowledge.

"Ah you see, but this is indeed the faster way, for all of it is of dire importance." Dumbledore replied dramatically. Harry struggled not to roll his eyes.

"So what happened to them?, Voldemort was raised in an orphanage." Harry asked, deciding it would only waste time to argue

with the man.

"We must do a certain amount of guessing here, although I do not think it is difficult to deduce what happened. You see, within a few months of their runaway marriage, Tom Riddle appeared at the manor house in Little Hangleton without his wife. The rumor flew around the neighborhood that he was talking of being 'hoodwinked' and 'taken in'. What he meant, I am sure, is that he had been under an enchantment that had now lifted, though I daresay he did not dare to use those precise words for fear of being thought insane. When they heard what he was saying, however, the villagers guessed that Merope had lied to Tom Riddle, pretending that she was going to have his baby, and that he had married her for his reason."

Harry stayed silent when Dumbledore paused, knowing he was expected to add something to push the man along, but refusing to play the game now. He did not have control over his temper the way he would have liked, and he knew that playing along with Dumbledore would put him in a worse mood than anything else. He doubted screaming at the man or ripping out his own hair would save him any time.

"He did have her baby, of course, but not until a year after they were married. Tom Riddle left her while she was still pregnant."

Harry waited while Dumbledore paused again, wondering if he could get away with taking off a shoe and studying the wards in the headmaster's office. He guessed not.

"Again, this is guesswork," continued Dumbledore, "but I believe that Merope, who was deeply in love with her husband, could not bear to continue enslaving him by magical means. I believe that she made the choice to stop giving him the potion. Perhaps, besotted as she was, she had convinced herself that he would by now have fallen in love with her in return. Perhaps she thought he would stay for the baby's sake. If so, she was wrong on both counts. He left her, never

saw her again, and never troubled to discover what became of his son."

Bastard, thought Harry, diverting his attention to the window outside. The sky outside was inky black and the lamps in Dumbledore's office seemed to glow more brightly than before in comparison. Harry wished for a moment that he could escape from all the lights, and go outside. He hadn't seen the stars in months, and he thought that maybe that would make his thoughts stop processing what he was hearing. He didn't want to have too much sympathy for Voldemort, and this was certainly not helping. He was supposed to kill the man, why on earth would he want to know the past if it only served to make Voldemort look more human?

"I think that will do for tonight, Harry." said Dumbledore after a moment or two.

"Yes, sir." said Harry, getting to his feet.

"Oh but Harry, it's very important that you go to your Potions class. " Dumbledore said gravely. Harry had to close his eyes for a second to keep from rolling them now.

"May I ask why, sir?" Harry asked as politely as he could.

"Potions is a beautiful art, Harry, one that even Voldemort never fully understood."

"I will never be an excellent potions master, professor." Harry answered honestly.

"No, but like in most things, the beauty lies in the intent, not the result." Dumbledore responded, the light in his eyes returning.

That was meaningless. Harry thought.

"Thank you, sir." He said instead, and headed for the door.

"I would ask you not to repeat any of this to anybody but Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger, if you would. They have both proved themselves trustworthy, but it would not be a good idea to let word get around how much I know, or suspect, about Lord Voldemort's secrets."

"No sir, I'll make sure it's just Ron and Hermione. Good night." Harry answered. He turned away again, and was almost at the door when something caught his eye. Sitting on one of the tables by the door was an ugly gold ring set with a large, cracked, black stone.

"Sir," said Harry, staring at it and collecting his thoughts. "Isn't that the same ring Marvolo Gaunt showed Ogden?"

"The very same." Dumbledore answered from behind him.

"When did you get it?, sir." Harry pressed, yet again turning around to face the headmaster.

This would be one of the 'family heirlooms' Gaunt treasured. Is Dumbledore collecting Voldemort's heirlooms?

"I acquired it very recently," said Dumbledore. "A few days before I came to fetch you from your aunt and uncle's, in fact."

"That would be around the time you injured your hand, then, sir?" Harry asked, wondering if that was why Dumbledore's voice expressed so much importance when he spoke of the ring.

"Around that time, yes, Harry."

Harry waited, wondering if Dumbledore was going to extrapolate or not. It didn't matter if he asked the question aloud or not, so he didn't bother.

"You shall hear the story another time. Good night, Harry." Dumbledore dismissed. Harry bowed his head a touch in acceptance.

"Good night, sir."

He left.

And ran straight into Snape on his way out of the staircase.

"Late for curfew again, Mr. Potter?" Snape drawled, looking pleased.

I'm leaving the Headmaster's office, this can hardly be called wandering the halls.

"I do not believe so, sir." Harry replied, doing his best to sound perfectly polite and searching Snape's face for any kind of reaction.

"I do not care what you believe to be true, Mr. Potter. Five points from Gryffindor for impertinence." Snape snapped.

"Take ten, my thoughts were surely twice as rude." Harry replied in a light tone, before nodding slightly to his professor. "If you'd excuse me sir, I do have to return to my dorm. Curfew is in fifteen minutes, I believe." Harry replied, carefully not smirking as he walked past.

"Detention!, Mr. Potter. Every day next week." Snape ordered.

"Yes, sir." Harry replied seriously, turning back to face him and nod carefully before continuing on to his dorm.

Harry said goodnight to McGonagall minutes from the curfew, and went immediately to study on his bed. Ron rushed in moments later, grumbling about non-verbal spells and their impossibility and threw himself onto his own bed, only to sit up and glare at his wand until he turned purple in the face. He had only succeeded at three silent



spells in the entire week, and was still sore at Harry and Hermione for picking them up so quickly.

Harry said goodnight and closed his curtains, spelling the space around himself to hide his light, so, like every night, Ron would think he'd gone to sleep.

He spent all of Sunday in the Room of Requirement. He preferred studying there to anywhere else. When he asked for a place to study he was given a quiet, warm library full of books he hadn't read before. Every two hours he'd get up, dress in his invisibility cloak and leave the room, to pace in the hallway outside asking for the training room. The greatest part was, with the invisibility cloak and the Room of Requirement, he didn't have to use the polyjuice potion until he had to report for curfew that night, which meant he didn't have to waste more than three hours of potion, and he could get up without pain. He loved weekends, Harry decided.

He switched from four to three and a half hours asleep, and gave himself another hour to train in the Room of Requirement. He was started to be able to feel the room's magic as it started to make a spell, and he'd found himself with another goal: he wanted to be able to know how the room's magic was transferred to the individual spell's magic without a wand or incantation or even a mind to guide it. So he changed his sleep schedule, and pulled his instant coffee mix out of his things to carry with him. He ate it dry, and drank his polyjuice, and for all intents and purposes, looked the same.

Even so, in Thursday's Advanced Transfigurations, Hermione passed him a note.

Harry, I'm starting to worry about you. It's only the second week back but still, I haven't seen you around at all, you're not even in the Great Hall anymore. Are you okay?

Harry read the note quickly, and wrote below it quickly:

I'm fine. Dobby brings me food. Don't worry about me, just think of it as you during finals week.

Harry returned to his book, and had just found his place when another scrawled note was thrown on top of the text.

You shouldn't make Dobby do that. Maybe go down to the kitchen and pack yourself lunches?

Harry brushed the note back to Hermione and returned to his book. The class was studying the theory of self-transfiguration, which he'd already learned. The practicum part of the class was on Monday and Friday. McGonagall didn't seem to mind if he studied on his own while she spoke to the rest of the class on lecture days. Hermione did the same thing, and as long as they were studying transfiguration of some sort, Professor McGonagall left them alone.

Professor McGonagall seemed much less strict when it came to her Advanced class. Whenever Harry looked up to see if the group was learning anything he needed to know, he only saw half of the class really paying attention. The rest seemed immersed in their own research, and McGonagall even had a ten minute break half-way through the two hour class when anyone could ask a question about any level of transfiguration magic.

"How do you take an organic material and affect it without a full transfiguration, and keep its intrinsic quality?" Hermione asked suddenly.

Harry looked up again and saw that the question succession was well under way.

"I mean like for example, leather. How would you rework it without drying it out and having it crack?" She reworded, apparently understanding that her question hadn't been nearly specific enough.

"Well, with leather that would simply require a reshaping transfiguration, I'd suggest you ignore the material entirely while you are transfiguring its shape. After that, I'd advise you to be very careful to concentrate solely on the aspect you want changed while you work it. If you wanted leather of a different colour, you would concentrate fully on the colour and nothing else." McGonagall answered.

"Oh, of course, that'd be easy." Hermione replied, though she sounded disappointed.

"If you were trying to subtly change the organic make-up of a material without affecting its quality," continued McGonagall, "the task becomes more difficult. Say for example, to transfigure hair to be more curly, you would have to first study the organic make-up of the material in question, and then concentrate on transfiguring the precise aspects of the material that need to change in order to make the affect you'd like to see."

"Thank you." Hermione answered, blushing furiously.

"Are you okay?" Parvati Patil whispered, staring at Hermione's red face.

"I think you have beautiful hair, I don't know why you're going to change it." Luna announced loudly, smiling brightly at Hermione. Hermione buried her face in her hands.

"Oh thank god Malfoy skipped today." Hermione whispered between her fingers.

What the hell are they talking about? Harry wondered quickly, before darting his eyes back in his book. Girls made no sense, he already knew that, he was supposed to be learning if it were possible to transfigure himself to look or be healthier.

By the end of class, he knew it wasn't even close to possible. He'd have to transfigure his entire body to be healthier at the same time, which was the equivalent of an animagus change but much more difficult, because if he messed up an animagus change, he simply wouldn't change form. If he messed up a complete human self-transfiguration, he risked killing himself in thousands of different minute ways. He'd have to stick to polyjuice potions, though he cursed the potion-master that made them: according to what Hermione had said in second year, polyjuice potions were poisonous when mixed with pain relievers.

"Mr. Potter, stay for a moment please." Professor McGonagall called as he got up to leave. Harry suppressed a frustrated sigh and approached where she was standing in front of her desk.

"Yes?" Harry prompted as politely as he could.

"As you know, your N.E.W.T.s are at the end of next year. I'd like to talk to you about that." She explained.

"Oh, I'm already studying." Harry replied, thinking over how much he'd learned since he'd used that lie with Dudley.

"So I've noticed." McGonagall didn't look pleased at the thought. "Mr. Potter I would be the first to say that you can not do well on your N.E.W.T.s without serious application, practice and study, however there is no logic in working so hard to prepare for them that you kill yourself before you even make it to the actual test."

McGonagall met his eyes as she emphasized the last and looked almost prepared to wink.

We're not talking about the N.E.. Harry was impressed with McGonagall's subtlety, and nodded slightly to her before breaking off the eye contact.

"I have not seen you in the Great Hall at all this week. You look beyond exhausted. Ms. Granger told me she is also concerned. I am glad to see you applying yourself, however this new-found passion you have for studying is unhealthy, to say the least." McGonagall continued easily.

Wait, are we actually talking about the N.E.?

Harry glanced back to McGonagall's eyes, wondering if he'd imagined their silent communication. McGonagall raised her eyebrows at him slightly, obviously asking for a reply.

"I've been getting meals from the house-elves." Harry said, unable to think of a better response, though it sounded like a child's whine. Professor McGonagall pursed her lips unhappily.

"You have two years before your exams, Mr. Potter." McGonagall reminded him.

But so much less before I'm tested. Harry thought, though he knew better than to say it. It sounded too dramatic anyway.

"I've slacked for years, Professor. I'm trying to make up for that now, and I'm behind." Harry said, doing his best to sound as if he were legitimately worried about a Ministry test.

"Pace yourself, and you will find you will be able to stick to your studying for longer." McGonagall advised.

I've kept to this schedule for over two months, I'm hardly dropping it now.

"Plan time to relax and be with your friends." She said.

How many people do I have to get killed before this school will

realize that letting me relax and spend time with friends all these years was a phenomenally bad idea?

"There are a great number of people who care for you here, Harry Potter. Take care of yourself, for them if nothing else." McGonagall told him, sounding like she wanted to be quoted on a chocolate frog card one day.

"Thank you, professor." Harry answered. He felt like he'd grown up a little, and had somehow never noticed it, when he saw that he hadn't muttered or blushed or stumbled over his answer to her 'care' like he would have only months before. It felt like years since he'd been so childishly awkward. All he'd had to do was decide not to stumble through his speech, and he'd stopped doing it.

McGonagall acknowledged him with a nod, and Harry left to go to the Great Hall. Apparently he couldn't get away with eating his meals in the Room of Requirement: he spent twice as much time reassuring people that yes, he'd eaten, as it took to walk down to the Great Hall to eat in public.

Still, it was frustrating, since he'd already identified most of the wards on the Gryffindor table, and he didn't want to explain why he took off his shoes and socks and kept his feet pressed against the cold stone at every meal.

"Hermione, do you mind telling me why you spoke to McGonagall about my worrisome eating habits before you bothered mentioning it to me?" Harry asked Hermione lightly as he sat down to lunch with them.

"I passed you a note that I was worried!" Hermione replied quickly, blushing.

"Not until after you'd spoken to McGonagall apparently." Harry said, and heard his voice come out as an annoyed growl.

"She asked, she was worried, and I-" Hermione stopped herself suddenly. "I did do that, didn't I? I'm sorry, Harry!" She professed, almost bouncing up and down in her seat with worry.

That was easy.

"Don't worry about it, just don't go to professors about me, okay?" Harry replied, serving himself food and waiting for her promise.

"We just never see you anymore, mate. I think I've talked to you twice in the last two weeks." Ron cut in.

"You never eat here, and you say you're training, and it's awesome that you're really applying yourself to this, but I worry that you are burning yourself out. I really am worried, Harry. " She bit her lip, obviously split between her obsession with academics and her worry.

"I'm not on my own, Moody is training me." Harry replied, trying to imply that the man was actually looking out for his health. He wanted to snort at the thought.

"Mad-Eye Moody? Wicked! Is that why he's teaching here this year, 'cause of Dumbledore?" Ron asked, sounding excited.

"I don't know, maybe." Harry answered.

"Harry, he's not exactly the most...uh...responsible type." Hermione argued hesitantly.

"Are you kidding, he's one of the best aurors the Ministry has ever had!" Ron argued back. "Haven't you heard him in class, he's perfect for teaching Harry!"

"He's going mental, Ron. Everyone sees it." Hermione said harshly.

"Yeah but he's paranoid about health, isn't he? He's the most likely of anyone to make sure I'm healthy all the time." Harry interjected.

"Hmm...I could see that." Hermione said as she gnawed at her lip.

"Trust me, I've spent a week training with the man, he'll keep me healthier than Lavender Brown." Harry answered, making them all glance down the table at the vegetarian sixth year, who was conveniently caught up in a loud conversation with a second year about the protein in carrots.

"I'm not sure that counts as a good thing." Ron replied quietly.

"Here, I'll even eat in the Great Hall, so you don't think I'm getting too healthy, okay?" Harry offered, having already made the decision.

Please Moody, act sane around them today.

"Don't be mad at me?" Hermione asked, biting her lip.

"I'm not." Harry replied with a smile.

"Aannd change of topic, we've got Quidditch tryouts this afternoon!" said Ron, grinning at Harry, before his smile quietly sank without a bubble. "Oh. Right." Ron remembered, frowning.

"Sorry." Harry replied, wincing slightly.

He decided to spend the whole meal with them. He didn't have a new book with him to learn from, and he didn't have time to return to the Room of Requirement before his Defense class, so he might as well finish convincing them not to talk to him about his health anymore. Part of his mind itched to get back to his books, but if Hermione kept going to McGonagall, he didn't know how bad it could get. He kept most of his mind devoted to the wards around the Great Hall, and kept an ear out for their conversation.



"No one's even trying out this year. Katie said only like half as many people applied this year as last."

"Katie Bell is captain?" Harry asked suddenly, liking the choice.

"Duh, you told McGonagall you wanted that last week." Ron replied.

"Er..Oh, right." Harry answered, only then remembering his meeting with McGonagall. She hadn't been thrilled by any means, but it was a more pleasant conversation than when she was worrying about him.

"Anyway, Quidditch is apparently considered a lame sport now that you're not involved." Ron grumbled.

"Hey, there's no way anyone in this school believes that. You know as well as I how important Quidditch is." Harry argued back, trying not to snort at his own words.

It felt strange, somehow, that someone in the world still invested any of their time or thoughts in the game. It was strange to see Ron thinking about it, and stranger still to try and join him in the conversation.

How can anyone justify tearing their mind away from thoughts on the war to think about the fastest way to catch a flying yellow ball?

As if agreeing with him, the post owls arrived, bringing letters from anxious parents and copies of the Daily Prophet.

Hermione paid the bird absentmindedly, already scanning the front page for news of the war.

"Anyone we know dead?" asked Ron in a determinedly casual voice.

"No, but there have been more dementor attacks," said Hermione.

"And an arrest."

"Who?" Harry asked, thinking it was too good of a fate for Bellatrix Lestrange.

"Stan Shunpike." said Hermione.

"What?" said Harry, startled. "The Knight Bus conductor?"

"Yeah, it says here he was arrested after he was overheard talking about the Death Eaters' secret plans in a pub." She looked up with a troubled expression on her face. "Then it probably wasn't the Imperius Curse, otherwise he would hardly stand around gossiping about their plans."

"Unless he was imperio'd to." Harry argued reasonably.

"To reveal the Death Eater's plans?" Ron asked incredulously.

"To spread false information, or just spread fear." Harry supplied.

"Maybe the Death Eaters wanted to get him arrested, say if they were done imperio-ing him and you know, wanted him to go poof." Ginny added, turning from her conversation with Dean Thomas two seats down from them.

I forgot to cast a muffling spell. Harry remembered too late.

What's the use of learning magic if I can't even remember to use it?

"Hey, good point." Ron answered her, apparently forgetting that she was only supposed to hang out with her own year-mates.

She grinned.

"Who do you think Katie's gunna pick as beaters this year?" She

asked.

The conversation disintegrated from there, and Hermione pulled out a book. Harry sighed with relief when she started ignoring the world in favor of learning; it gave him the perfect chance to do the same. He borrowed her copy of the Daily Prophet, and started with the article on Stan Shunpike.

He read Hannah Abbott's mother's obituary with a grimace and gladly passed on to the names he didn't recognize in the article about scared parents sending their children to boarding schools in the countryside.

The Room of Requirement's training room provided him with targets that day. Sacks of sand would appear from nowhere. Spells would shoot from them until he'd successfully hexed them twice. It was a relief to be able to fight back for once, though the sacks of sand didn't stop appearing until he shouted 'stop'.

It was haunting, that night, the first time he practiced with them, to see the sacks laying all around him after, leaking sand from the holes and slashes he'd cut. Harry allowed himself a full minute just to stare at them.

He spent that Saturday mastering how to run, hex, and shield at the same time. His shields he kept up constantly now, and added to them at every moment as he ran and hexed the sand around him.

He could feel the entire room, and every time he left the Room he was better at identifying hexes before they ever got close to his wards. The more spells he identified, the easier it became. Advanced spells were mostly combinations of much simpler magical ideas, so even the most complex levitating spell had aspects of 'wingardium leviosa' in it. The more of those magical 'building blocks' that he learned to recognize, the easier it was to deconstruct what the magic in an unknown spell really was, and what it was designed to do.

He still couldn't figure out how the Room knew what spells to send at him. It never sent him spells that he'd never learned, so he always had a chance to unravel the magic and learn the feeling of a spell that he wanted to know about. It seemed that as soon as he realized that his current challenge in the training room was too easy for him, the Room threw in something to make it more difficult.

He was reminded of Author Weasley's warning never to trust anything magical if you couldn't figure out. He knew why that was good advice now: there was no such thing as a spell to make an object think. It wasn't possible, which meant that an object that appeared to make decisions on its own, was quite likely tied into a living wizard's brain, and if you didn't know who that wizard was, it was unwise to trust the object that acted for him.

So either the Room had a day-by-day training schedule worked into it, or there was a wizard out there who was controlling the Room to help him train. Harry desperately wanted to know which that was, but he couldn't learn that without knowing where the spells came from.

By the end of all the breaks the Room of Requirement forced on him (it would now randomly change into his study room) he had all of his schoolwork done, some papers finished weeks ahead of time. It helped that he didn't need to do any research into anything but McGonagall's assigned paper on simple self-transfigurations. Harry guessed that it was thanks to the open library pass Dumbledore had given him that library books were summoned into the Room as soon as he realized which title he needed.

Harry spent Sunday morning studying his invisibility cloak. The spells in it were strange, old somehow, and more cohesive than the spells he was used to. He couldn't pull a single spell out of it like he was used to, the magic felt almost literally woven together.

After two hours had passed, he gave up and put his cloak back into

his trunk. He drank his polyjuice before he got out of bed, having decided the night before that it was time he learned more about the wards. He'd only learned a few layers of the magic in the wards, which he knew was like having scratched a layer of dust off of a brick wall. But he'd paid for that knowledge with two full hours of wrenching and a random nosebleed, so he was proud of the improvement.

Feed the Author? Review me!

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Harry was happy to be at Hogwarts after that first week. For every moment he spent awake, he could find something to learn. He never stopped concentrating on the magic around himself. He felt safe again. He hadn't realized how much he'd coveted the feeling until he could wrap himself in his magic and know there wasn't a curse coming for him in any direction.

His hours in the Room of Requirement slowly worked their way into his schedule until he didn't even need to think about when to enter or leave the room. His mind would tell him when it was time for sleep or dinner or class. Moody came in every now and then, to sneer at him and shout insults for a few minutes.

Harry forced himself not to curse at the man, no matter how frustrated he could get. He was exhausted and in pain and hungry but sometimes the insults held suggestions, and he needed all the help he could get.

"What the hell do you think you are doing out there? You need to think to fight or a house-elf will be picking up your remains with a mop before you ever see an Order battlefield!" Yelled Moody that Wednesday, adding a few hexes of his own into the mix Harry was blocking.

"What do I need to improve, sir?" Harry called back.

"The spells and shields you're concentrating on should be reflexes by now, what the hell have you been doing all month?"

Harry considered the man's words as he took down three more sandbags that appeared behind and beside him. His wandless shields were strong, and he was keeping his magical sense open to

feel any types of hexes that could get through all three of his shields.

The Room of Requirement sent all of the hexes he knew, including the nastiest Dark magic he'd learned to cast and block. Other than the unforgivables, it didn't hold back and he didn't want it to; he knew his practice sessions were already becoming too easy. He just didn't know what more the Room of Requirement could teach him.

"You should be thinking for once in your worthless life." Moody was growling.

"What should I be thinking about, sir?" Harry asked as he started doing somersaults around the room in a futile attempt to make fighting the sandbags more difficult.

"Why should I give a shit what you're thinking about, Potter. As long as you're not getting more of my people killed-"

"You told me to be thinking, sir." Harry interrupted calmly between jumps.

"You need to stop running about like a ferret, stand up and FIGHT!" Moody roared at him, sending a red hex straight through his shields. Harry jumped back from it and heard it smash against the wall behind him.

"You told me to run!" Harry shouted at him, lifting a shield against the next leg-breaking curse Moody tried to send against him. Moody had ordered him to run around the room since the start of the 'lesson'.

"An auror never runs away! I've never run from a fight in my life! COWARD!" Moody shouted back, casting a series of spells in a row.

Harry stood his ground and shielded against each spell, before sending one back at Moody. He almost forgot to hold his shields when he felt his 'petrificus totalus' stun the auror. Moody hadn't even

started to put up a counter-curse. Harry removed the spell immediately, wondering if his unpredictable trainer was going to be angry or proud of his success.

"Fool! Don't just stand there and take each spell as it comes! God you're incompetent. You have to keep moving, how many times have I told you that?" Moody roared at him.

Did he not notice the Petrificus spell at all?

"You told me not to run!" Harry yelled back.

"MOVE, FOOL!" Moody roared back, sending out another series of hexes that Harry blocked easily.

"Moody, what the fuck do you want?" Harry asked when he hit the ground to dodge a spell instead of blocking it, though he wasn't sure if that's what Moody had told him to do anymore.

"I want you to get your head out of your arse and think."

"Moody, just tell me what the hell you want me to do and I'll do it!" Harry growled, staying still on the ground and allowing the Room's spells to die against his shields.

"No! In battle no one will be there telling you to jump or run or scratch your bullocks! A good auror does not follow the word of anyone over his own common sense! If you judge it better to stand and fight, then do it!"

That doesn't sound like the code of a soldier, Harry thought. Moody was still shouting.

"If in the middle of a fight you have good reason to think your best friend is a spy for the other side, bring him down! Constant vigilance! Don't hesitate! You have nowhere near what it takes!"



"So you want me to disobey you, in other words?" Harry asked as reasonably as he could, hoping the man would give him some useful insults already.

"No! Aurors are the best of the best, you're more prepared to become a muggle plumber than a wizard fighter."

"Then teach me!" Harry argued again, glad the auror wasn't yelling at him to run anymore. There were so many sandbags piled in the room he could no longer move without stepping on one. He couldn't find the true Room of Requirement 'gymnasium' floor at all. He'd made an uneven pile of burlap dummies and loose sand across the entire room.

"No one can teach you to think, boy." Moody growled.

"Then teach me about the war." Harry decided. That was what he really couldn't learn on his own after all. He needed Moody to teach him what the Ministry was doing to fight the war and what the Order thought the Death Eaters were planning.

"You?" Moody scoffed.

"You said you would teach me!" Harry insisted, hating his words as soon as he'd formed them.

I'm fucking whining like I always did. Where the hell is this conversation going?" Harry thought. He thought he'd already convinced Moody to teach him what he knew.

"Don't you dare bloody tell me what I've said!" Moody rasped.

"Teach me everything you know." Harry ordered as he flicked his wand over his shoulder to destroy a group of twenty sandbags he'd felt pop up behind him.

"Who are you?! Harry Potter is an idiot, he doesn't make orders." Moody asked in a pinched voice, sounding deceptively calm.

Harry glanced at the auror and saw that Moody had a wand pointed at him again. He sighed, and strengthened his protective wards before returning to the endless fight against sandbags. He almost appreciated Moody distracting and attacking him; it helped him learn how to fight when he had to concentrate on something other than where the next spell would come from.

"I'm Harry Potter. You're the sixth Defense professor whose attacked me. You stopped Draco and I from fighting last month by saying 'stop'." Harry answered as he threw the twenty sandbags into a pile by the opposite wall, hoping he could clear the floor enough to continue running as Moody had originally ordered.

"Yeah, it's you." Moody grunted, though he didn't stop throwing hexes through Harry's shields.

"My practice here is getting too easy. What do I need to do to make it more difficult, Moody?" Harry asked, deciding quickly to banish the 'corpses' instead and quickly clearing the floor.

"Come here, I've got a good idea for you." Moody offered, sounding calm and sane again.

Harry nodded and obeyed.

"Put down your shields, I need to spell you with something." Moody ordered.

"Prove you're Moody first. Describe my cousin" Harry ordered, though he doubted anyone could fake Mad-Eye's insanity long enough to fool anyone. He mostly just asked the question to keep Moody from ranting at him for five minutes straight.

"Ugly whale of a child, hides behind his mother like a mutt with a master." Moody answered.

"Stop."

"You forgot the carrots." Harry informed Moody offhand before silently ordering the room to stop its attack. He didn't know how the magic behind the room worked, but he'd figured out a few days before that his silent orders worked. Harry wandlessly dropped all of his shielding charms. He'd gone weeks with at least three held around himself. The Room's magic felt clearer without them, but that didn't mean he understood it.

"Give me your hand." Moody barked.

Harry glanced at Moody's face, trying to discern how insane the man was feeling that day.

"Sir?" Harry asked, hoping he could tell more from the professor's voice. "What are you going to do?"

"Who cares?" Moody asked in a tone like a threat, his magical eye focused on Harry and nothing else.

He's right, that actually makes sense. Sacrifice anything, right? He knows how this is.

"Alright." Harry answered, and held his right hand out. Moody placed the point of his wand straight down on his palm.

"Next time don't hesitate." Moody ordered, and pure pain shot from the end of his wand.

"God, holy fuck." Harry gasped, pulling his hand away as fast as he could and cradling it to his chest. The pain spiked as he moved it,

and Harry gasped again. His gasp came out rough with phlegm, like a sob.

He didn't care what curse Mad-Eye had used or what was happening to him. His one hand lay limp in the other and all he wanted to do was scream.

The pain didn't go away; if anything it just got worse.

"Fuck, fuck fuck fuck." Harry backed away from Moody, whose figure was getting more and more blurry as tears started to flow into his eyes. Harry clenched his eyes shut against them, and concentrated on the bright lights that popped up under his eyelids.

"You need to learn to fight when injured. The Death Eaters won't stop and give you time to heal yourself, and you might not have time to cast your pretty shields that keep you so safe and weak." Moody barked at him.

He's right, damn it he's right.

Harry had to jump back to avoid a hex he felt heading towards him. He almost screamed aloud from the jolt the movement gave his hand.

How the fuck do I fight like this? Shit, I can't even hold my wand.

He felt another spell coming and knew he'd have to roll out of the way to avoid it. He stood, opened his eyes and let the magic hit him instead. Surely getting stabbed wouldn't be nearly as bad as his hand, he'd done it before with the basilisk and survived fine.

Harry felt pain pulse through his shoulder and gasped in another breath. He was right, the stab wound wasn't nearly as painful, and it pulled his attention away from his broken hand. The relief was a blessing and he breathed in a deep breath before the pain from his

broken hand reasserted itself.

That was what had happened, he realized then. Moody had cast the hex they'd discussed before, that broke all the bones in a wizard's right hand.

"You're a fucking bastard." Harry cursed out, letting the next spell hit him too. He couldn't fight wandlessly, he knew that. He didn't know any fighting spells that he could do without a wandmotion. He needed his wand to start the magic, and without that he had no way to fight.

Moody laughed.

"So I am!" Moody called out, sounding thrilled with the title.

By that time Harry didn't care what Moody wanted to say to him. He'd been hit with a puking hex, and was concentrating on not moving his hand in the process of throwing up.

I'm bloody helpless. Harry realized, and struggled not to scream or cry with the frustration and pain of it.

I'm not going to learn anything this way.

Stop. Harry ordered the room again, and saw the sandbag in front of him disappear into nothing.

He felt a spell hit him, and his stomach stopped twisting immediately.

A counter-curse then. Harry thought, desperately grateful to the professor, even as he recognized what damage the insane professor could cast on him right then.

"Weak!" Moody barked.

"I need to study wandless magic first, I need to be able to fight to learn how to fight through pain." Harry insisted through gritted teeth.

"Heal my hand. I can't cast with my left." Harry ordered, and sighed as, finally, the pain pulsing through his hand stopped, and he could think again.

"Hell." Moody cursed, and left.

Harry broke his routine that night, and decided not to sleep. He went instead to the Room of Requirement, and spent his night in the study room, trying to learn how to cast without moving his wand, like he saw his Dumbledore and Snape manage. By the end of the night practicing wandlessly he was no further, and wanted to die, if only so he could sleep.

He barely managed to stand up afterward, and was sick with dizziness by the time he made it to the door. He felt feverish, and prayed he wasn't sick, though he knew it was just part of being exhausted. He was supposed to be used to that, though right then Harry was sure no one could 'get used to it', it felt like he was dying.

He stumbled out of the door, and let it close itself behind him.

"So you've finally discovered the Room of Requirement, have you?" A light voice drawled from behind him. Harry groaned to himself. He knew that voice.

"Yes." Harry grumbled his answer and stumbled further down the hall, not bothering to turn around.

"It's rude to walk away when someone's talking to you."

"As fascinating as that is, Draco, I really don't care." Harry replied, still stumbling down the hall. Draco was too young to be a Death Eater, so he was insignificant. Harry had decided that after their fight

in the Defense classroom, and repeated it to himself now.

Thank god he's insignificant, Harry thought as he pushed himself forward. It meant he didn't have to try and impress Draco Malfoy anymore. It didn't matter, he'd stumble around the 'rival' boy if he wanted to, and he wasn't sure if he could walk tall and proud right now anyway. Though on second thought, Harry figured as he walked, perhaps it was a worse insult to walk away without giving the boy a cursory glance. Draco Malfoy had always wanted to be feared, after all.

"Don't you dare walk away from me!" Malfoy's voice called after him. Harry almost snorted at how young he sounded.

"I'll kill you!"

"Fuck you, Potter, you can't even stand and fight. You coward!"

"Potter!"

"You're a bloody disgrace, afraid to face me, are you?."

"Your lucky your parents died before they saw you run away from a fight, you know. They'd be so damn ashamed they'd probably walk in front of an AK curse themselves."

Harry missed a step, wanting so badly to turning around that his entire body felt like it was shaking. There weren't very many reasons why not to hex the Slytherin. Draco was too young to be a Death Eater, but Harry had no doubt about which side of the war the youngest Malfoy was heading towards.

He's insignificant. Harry reminded himself, and kept walking.

"You shouldn't turn your back on a Death Eater, Potter. Didn't your parents teach you that?"

Harry stopped short, thinking. Malfoy had just called himself a Death Eater. Did he still have an excuse why not to kill him? Suddenly Harry didn't want to turn around and fight, he wanted to go back to breakfast and try to stay awake until class and ignore what Draco being a Death Eater could mean.

Harry looked up and saw Draco's reflection in a brass shield in the hall in front of him.

Draco looked ragged. His eyes were red and his customarily slicked hair was frayed and obviously wet from somewhere. He looked desperate and furious and horridly young.

Do I look like that, without the polyjuice?

Harry thought about the braids he had without the potion. They were oily and tattered and trailed over his shoulders; he wasn't even sure he'd be able to get the braids out if he tried anymore, and he knew for a fact that his eyes were just as red as Draco's.

Harry couldn't do it. He knew right then that he wouldn't be able to turn around and cast a killing hex on his rival. He had hundreds of offensive spells on the tip of his tongue, but he knew for a fact that he'd gag on every single one of them.

It was possible Draco wasn't a Death Eater. He'd always bragged about power that he didn't really have, he'd always been proud of things he hadn't really done. Harry didn't know of any underage Death Eaters, and doubted Voldemort would take in children, no matter how well trained in Dark magic they were. It was possible Draco was lying, likely even.

As long as Harry didn't know, he didn't have to deal with it.

Weak, his mind mocked him, but for once the word wasn't able to



spur him into action.

"They'd probably announce to the world they regretted you were born if they saw the little blood-traitor coward you grew into. Your daddy wished he settled for a blowjob from your mudblood mother, didn't he? That must be why he went and got himself AK'd then." Malfoy sneered at him. Harry watched his mouth twist into the words through the brass reflection.

Wow, our insults really are changing, Harry noted, remembering Hermione's shocked expression from before.

Draco is trying hard to be a Death Eater, and I tried to defend myself by showing how cruel my words could be. Words aren't cruelty, hexes are. Fuck it.

"Stay away from the Room of Requirement, Potter." Malfoy spat out his name like a curse, as always. "You're superiors have want of it." He announced haughtily with his chin lifted and his nose in the air. Harry was grateful for how young the gesture made Malfoy look.

He hoped Draco would remain equally foolish until the war's end. He didn't want to kill anyone he'd seen as an eleven year old. Voldemort's death was going to be hard enough.

'You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort, Potter. I can help you there.' he said something like that, and I told him I would do it myself, but could I have helped Draco do the same? Taught him his own family was the so-called 'wrong sort'?

Harry tore his eyes from Draco's reflection, and continued limping towards Gryffindor Tower. He had to change before he went to the Great Hall for breakfast.

In Defense that day they started on motionless casting, 'still spelling'.

Harry jabbed himself in his still-sore shoulder to wake himself up when Moody announced that.

"Still spelling is useful for the same reason as silent casting. The less warning you give to your opponent while you fight, the less likely you are to die. To learn motionless casting you have to understand what you are actually doing when you are casting a spell, rather than waving your wand around like a chippendale in a strip club."

Did he seriously just say that? Harry asked himself, and could practically hear the rest of the class thinking similar thoughts.

"If any of you have actually gone and learned any magic whatsoever outside of a classroom, you should recognize this symbol." Moody said as the chalk behind him drew a kind of stylized spiral on the board.

Harry recognized it immediately, but Neville had his hand up first.

"Yeah?" Moody pointed at Neville with his wand.

"That's a casting symbol Sir. That one's used to set a target, like for a-aggressive spells." Neville answered, almost without a stutter.

"You've been learning offensive spells, have you?" Moody asked with a grimace of a smile, his wand still pointed at Neville's chest. Harry silently cast a shielding charm and held it wandlessly, prepared to cast it around his friend.

"Yes, sir." Neville answered honestly, either oblivious of the threat or acting wonderfully.

"Good, this is a war. Don't any of you forget it or your guts will be left for the house-elves to clean up." Moody barked, waving his wand back at forth to point at all of the class.

"To cast motionless spells you have to know the intent of the wandmotion you're skipping, and concentrate on it. Do not concentrate on the wandmotion, don't try to 'swish and flick' your wand with your mind, that makes no sense and you'll just end up staring at your wand looking constipated for an hour like you did when we started silent spells. Concentrate on the boundaries you want for your spell, or the target, or whatever else your wandmotion did for you before. Now go practice that til you still suck at it."

This time Harry got up to practice with the rest of the group. Ron had paired himself with Lavender. Hermione was visibly fuming. Harry joined her, and they decided to start with Wingardium Leviosa. It was the easiest wandmotion to learn.

"It's really strange being unable to make even a desk float." Hermione muttered as she failed her second time.

"When I started wandless spells I couldn't even make a card float." Harry replied encouragingly.

"You've started learning wandless spells?!" Hermione asked excitedly, though she kept her voice down.

Whoops. And again this is why I'm supposed to think then speak. Bloody hell I hope she doesn't ask for me to teach her.

"Harry that's really advanced magic!" She exclaimed, in the exact tone as she'd used with his Patronus in third year. At least, in this case, she was right.

"Yeah but don't worry, I seriously suck at it, and that's an understatement." Harry replied, wincing at the memory of the night before.

"Well, this practice will help, right? I mean, you can't do wandless magic if you don't know how to cast without a wandmotion."

Hermione replied.

Damn, she catches on fast.

"Yeah, I figured that out yesterday. Anyway, my turn." Harry answered, giving her time to step out of the way before he tried to cast anything.

He concentrated on the desk, and made sure he was only aiming at it before he muttered his spell.

"Wingardium Leviosa." Harry ordered, and felt his Occlumency waver. His thoughts were above his ocean of water, there for the world to see before he concentrated and reorganized his mind.

Meanwhile the desk had tipped over and crashed to the floor. Harry looked down at the tipped desk, wondering how he could have managed not to hear it fall, though it had quite obviously stolen the attention of the entire class.

"Bloody hell." Harry muttered.

"Wow, Harry, you managed something!" Hermione complimented him.

"Hermione, that's really not a compliment." Harry muttered to her.

"Oh! No, Harry I meant-" Hermione stopped herself. "Oh whatever." She said instead. Harry tried to grin at her, and hoped it worked, though he wasn't sure he had enough energy to move the correct 47 muscles in his face, or however many muggle science had counted.

Harry didn't manage controlled motionless magic in that class, though he and Hermione both managed to do something in the class period, which was better than the rest. Ron was glaring at them both by the time they left, but stayed behind to help Lavender with her

casting. Harry walked out with Hermione, and quickly decided to let her rant.

"God she's ridiculous and he's gushing nonsense at her, like 'three dimensional distribution parameters' like that even means anything, which it doesn't, I mean hell, even he knows that, but she's there nodding up and down like 'sure, Ronnikins'. God it makes me want to throw up!" Hermione screeched.

"Well-" Harry started.

"Okay! Fine! I know, distribution parameters make sense, hell he probably even heard it from me, and how rude is that? But we weren't even working with three dimensional distributed spells, so what the hell was he even talking about. I don't know why he's trying either, I mean everyone knows she doesn't like him for who he is, she just wants to snog someone on the Quidditch team!"

"Ron's on the Quidditch team?" Harry asked, surprised.

Oh shit, dumb question.

Hermione was gaping at him, her rant over.

"You didn't know? Shit Harry, Ron's told you like eleven times."

"Oh yeah, he made chaser right?" Harry guessed, biting his lip.

"Keeper, Harry." She corrected softly.

"Right." Harry winced.

"Harry, I might be screaming about him right now, but I'll be the first to kill you for hurting him like that. He's been on the team for three weeks, he has a game the Friday after next." She said softly.

"Hermione, I need to study." Harry replied.

"You need your friends too."

That sounds nice, but what the hell does it mean?

"I'm going to join a war this year, 'Mione. If my friends can't stand by me though this then... I can lose friends, I can't back down from this fight." Harry answered, carefully schooling his face away from a grimace.

"Harry, what are you talking about?, we're not going to stop being friends with you, but you're seriously hurting Ron right now. And me too, to be honest."

"Then what are you saying?" Harry asked, turning and walking down the hall with her.

"That you have more in your life than this war!" She was raising her voice now.

"No I don't." Harry replied, turning his face to look at her as he walked. "Neither can live while the other survives? Remember how I told you that it was true?, this is exactly what I meant. No, I can't go and watch Ron play Quidditch, or be a Seeker, or spend time being bleedin' terrible at Wizard's Chess. That's not what I'm for, Hermione. I'm supposed to be a weapon against this greatest wizard of all time, someone Dumbledore won't fight one-on-one, but right now I don't even know how to protect myself, I can't do motionless magic and I can't fight if I lose my wand. When I break my right hand, I'm left fucking helpless, and I can't just deal with that, I have to learn how to fight without it, I have to learn how to fight no matter what fucking happens, because this war is going to get ugly fast, and I will. Not. Be. Useless."

By the time Harry stopped to take a breath, he felt like he was

making a speech. Harry looked down at his toes, feeling foolish, before he forced himself to pull his head up and at least look proud and strong and all of that bullshit.

Damn it.

"Harry, you can't win the war single-handedly." Hermione stressed, oblivious to his thoughts.

"Apparently I do. Even if the prophecy was false when it was made, so what? Voldemort is still going to come after me, and my death will prove to the Death Eaters that he's more powerful than me. If Voldemort kills me, he wins. That's why I've gotta learn how to fight when I've got one hand limp and broken. So I can win the war with the other. Give me a few days, maybe a couple weeks, and I'll be ready for that too." Harry replied, knowing what she'd meant by 'single handedly' and almost laughing aloud at how unintentionally correct she was. He doubted she really meant that he should break one of his hands and learn to fight without it, but hell, whatever worked.

When he stopped grinning, he noticed a drop of water drip onto the first step of the staircase they'd approached.

"Hermione?" He probed.

"I hate this war. I hate all of it." She bit out, and wiped her face with the sleeve of her robe. "You're so brave, Harry." She said, shaking her head and dashing the wet tips of her bangs back out of her eyes with a quick brush of her hand.

"Not really. I'm rash and it puts me in situations where the only option other than die is to react, so I react. That's not precisely bravery." Harry replied.

"When did you get smarter than me?" She asked suddenly, looking

over at him. "You keep saying stuff like that. Like at dinner before, you said maybe Stan Shunpike was imperio'd to spread false information. I hadn't thought of that at all."

"I haven't been studying psychology if that's what you're asking." Harry said, not sure what answer she was looking for.

"Exactly!" She exclaimed, all trace of tears gone from her now wide eyes. "All you're ever studying is magic but it's like you're learning more than that, somehow."

"Alright." Harry answered, allowing his mind to slip back into his constant study of the Hogwarts wards now that the conversation had shifted to something less important.

"Come on, its dinner. Ron and 'Lav', are gunna beat us there if we keep this up." She said sticking out her tongue with the way she over-pronounced 'Lav'.

"Right." Harry answered, and walked slowly with her through the halls, trying his best to stretch his magical sense as far as he could down in front and behind them until he entered the Great Hall.

If he concentrated, he could feel almost the entire hall's worth of magic, but there was too much there that he couldn't identify, so it all became a mash in his mind. Harry concentrated instead on the Gryffindor table. He'd already learned all of the magic that used the table as its target object, so he concentrated instead on all of the magical objects his classmates were carrying.

There were bookbags with enlargement charms, flowing spells on quills, unbreakable charms on inkwells, weightless charms, privacy spells on girl's notebooks to make them unopenable or to disguise them as class notes, anti-stain charms on everything from books to clothing, Harry moved his focus down the table, identifying spells as he went.



Halfway through the meal Harry let out a bark of a laugh. He looked up to see Ron and Hermione glaring at him.

"Er...I wasn't laughing at you?" Harry tried, wondering what fight he'd interrupted. Hermione had turned her glare from him to drill a scathing look into the side of Ron's head.

"So, what were you laughing at mate?" Ron asked lightly, his eyes pleading 'get me out of this.'

"You know Neville's Rememberall?" Harry started. "It's not real, it's a scam. All it does is light up when you're stressed."

"Like a mood ring?" Hermione asked.

Ron glanced at her carefully before he asked what a mood ring was. Harry could almost hear the click in her brain when she found someone to teach something to. In an instant she was in lecture mode, and Harry knew there would be no stopping her. Looking at Ron's self-pleased expression, Harry suspected Ron knew it too, and had planned for it.

Harry went back to his magic, lightened by the moment. They hadn't even asked how he knew, Harry realized gratefully.

"Hey Harry, wanna play Wizard's Chess?" Ron's hopeful-sounding voice distracted Harry enough for him to pull out of his concentration and focus back on the table. Food had come, and most were finished eating. He'd forgotten to eat, apparently. Harry scolded himself silently, and grabbed what was left of dinner.

"No." Harry answered between bites, shaking his head back and forth slowly and keeping his eyes on his food. "Thanks." He added belatedly, glancing up.

"Exploding Snap?"

Bite, chew, swallow,

"No. Sorry." Harry replied, sending Ron what he hoped was a meaningful look.

"Normal chess?" Ron offered, staring straight back.

"No, thanks." Harry replied.

"I'd play truth or dare." Seamus offered from across the table.

"No, thanks."

"Hearts or hexes?" Dean offered. Harry just shook his head.

"Myths and mumpers?" A voice offered from down the table.

"Wizard's risk." Ron stated.

"Scrabble?" A third year muggle-born joined in.

"Hide and Hex?" Offered a first year hopefully.

What is this? Harry asked himself, looking around to see the entire table grinning and trying to think up more game titles. They weren't even giving him time to refuse anymore

"Quidditch?" Called Katie Bell from down the entire table, standing up from the bench so her voice would carry better.

"Curse or counter?"

"Dungeons and Dragons?" Called an obvious muggle-born.

"Houses and Humans?" Replied a wizard boy, grinning across the table at the muggle-born.

"Come on just do something with us, Harry." Hermione added quietly.

Harry glared at her. Of all the Griffindors he'd have thought she'd stop this, especially since they'd just finished the exact same conversation minutes before.

Meanwhile all of the Griffindors were calling out games to play.

"Snakes, Griffins, and Ladders?"

"Blind Wizard's Battle."

"Guess Who"

"Kung Fu."

"Kung Fu with Hexes"

"Diagonal Murder in Turnknock Alley"

"Checkers."

"Boggle."

"Moose, beer, and hot sauce?" Called out a seventh year, gaining groans from the entire table.

"What's that?" A forth year called back. The seventh year laughed and blushed.

Harry almost forgot himself and asked about the game as well, but remembered that he'd only be bringing more distraction down on himself. He was supposed to be concentrating on the Great Hall's

magic and finishing his dinner.

"Cards?"

"Witch's heart?"

"Poker?"

"Strip poker?"

"Just strip for us?"

That was Ginny, who was quickly drawn into a poking war with Dean Thomas. Harry wondered how long they'd been flirting without his noticing.

"Hell, we can go write our Charms papers together. Come on, Harry, it's been a month." Ron pleaded.

"Sorry, Ron." Harry answered, before picking up his bookbag and leaving the table. He was mostly finished eating anyway.

"Bloody hell." Harry heard Ron whisper as he walked away.

Damn damn damn the war. This sucks.

Moody didn't show up for Harry's practice that day, but Harry didn't really expect him to. It didn't matter anyway, Harry continued practicing focusing on setting boundaries with his mind, and managed to gain a hell of a headache and wandlessly float a couch before his alarm rang for him to drink his polyjuice and go down to dinner. He was frustrated, but at least he'd gotten off one controlled wandless spell without needing the 'swish and flick' wandmotion.

By the time he'd managed to stumble all the way down the steps to the Great Hall, Harry suspected he looked like a dead man, but none

of his friends mentioned it. Apparently they'd learned to let him eat.

The atmosphere in the Great Hall the next night was remarkably different, Harry noted as he entered. The entire Gryffindor table was silent, and morose, despite their day in Hogsmeade. Harry glanced at Dumbledore's empty seat, quietly wondering if his absence had something to do with the tension in the Great Hall, though he remembered Hermione mentioning something about the headmaster being gone a lot. Harry could hear each of his footsteps as he walked next to the table to join his friends.

"What happened?" Harry whispered, despite himself. He'd been planning on joining the table and taking advantage of the silence to concentrate on his magic, but as soon as he met Hermione's red eyes his concern slipped out.

"Katie Bell is in the hospital wing. Dark magic. Madam Pomfrey says she doesn't know." Dean answered instead. Harry glanced at him and saw Ginny hiding her face in Dean's shoulder.

"She's going to be fine but no one likes it. It means the war has entered Hogwarts." Hermione whispered back. Harry nodded that he understood, and the whispered conversation died. No one told anyone to be silent, but the message was there. There was nothing to say, no one who knew Katie wanted to talk about their lives when Katie might be losing hers, and the younger kids at the table weren't going to break the reverie the older Gryffindors had started.

It was strange, for the first time in months Harry found himself absolutely unable to concentrate, but he couldn't bring himself to stand up and leave either. He'd known Katie for years too, she managed to be competitive and kind at the same time, which was something Harry hadn't known was possible until he met her. He wondered if he was going to have to say that at a funeral someday soon, and shook off the thought.

The Gryffindors started their meal in silence, and by the time ten minutes had passed, the Ravenclaws had copied them. Barely a moment after the Ravenclaw's silence became noticeable, the Hufflepuff table silenced. It was haunting to see; one moment the entire Hufflepuff table was erupting in their usual chatter, and within ten seconds, the entire table had fallen silent. Slytherin kept up its usual noise, but their chatter dimmed under the scrutiny, and soon it seemed the Slytherins were trying desperately to speak as loudly as usual. That didn't last long, and by dessert the Great Hall was silent but for clinking plates.

By curfew word had spread that Katie had been moved to St. Mungos, but was going to be fine. Harry skipped the resulting party in Gryffindor, preferring to hide up in his dorm and study, now that he could finally concentrate again.

That night he finally mastered the trick to motionless magic, and spent Sunday going through all of the spells he knew without using their wandmotions. By curfew on Sunday he could occlude, detect magic, and cast all of his spells wandlessly, though his daily headache had returned with a vengeance. He skipped classes on Monday, preferring to spend his time in the Room of Requirement, wandlessly blasting his way through the sandbags. He decided immediately to keep his progress between himself and Moody, and it wasn't difficult to hold his wand in his hand while he concentrating on casting without it.

It was strange, feeling the magic inside him form itself into a spell he could recognize before it even left his body. It was different than the tight wire of magic that flowed into his wand before he openly formed it into a spell, and the new feeling was distracting. He'd spent a sickeningly frustrating hour learning to ignore it enough to concentrate on making the spell feel like it was supposed to, by setting targets and triggers and everything else that was designed into a spell to make it do what it was meant to.

Unfortunately his spells were pathetic with his left hand, which meant he still wasn't ready for Moody to return to teach him, and he had a meeting with Dumbledore that night that would take up hours of his night training time.

As expected, he still couldn't cast with his left hand by the time he was supposed to meet with the headmaster. It irritated him, but Harry found himself looking forward to learning what more about Voldemort he could learn. He'd already accepted the fact that he knew next to nothing about the war, and he needed that to change.

Harry didn't know whether Dumbledore would return from wherever he had been in time for Monday night's meeting, but he presented himself outside Dumbledore's office in any case, figuring he hadn't gotten any word to the contrary. He knocked, and found himself relieved to hear Dumbledore's voice telling him to enter. He hadn't expected it, but Dumbledore had found it in him to teach him something Harry actually wanted to know, and that fact dulled some of his annoyance with the man.

Dumbledore was sitting at his desk as always, looking exhausted but genuinely happy to see Harry enter. Harry sat at Dumbledore's request, and set himself up to wait for Dumbledore to waste his time with conversation.

"You have had a busy time while I have been away," Dumbledore said, right on cue. "I believe you heard about Katie's accident."

"Yes, sir. How is she?" Harry replied in turn.

"Still very unwell, although she was relatively lucky. She appears to have brushed the necklace with the smallest possible amount of skin: there was a hole in her glove. Had she put it on, had she even held it in her ungloved hand, she would have died, perhaps instantly. Again luckily, we had Professor Snape here, who was able to do enough to prevent a rapid spread of the curse." Dumbledore explained.

Harry stayed silent, hoping for more information on Snape and knowing he'd never get it if he asked. He hoped Dumbledore's need to have a conversation would work in his favor for once.

"I know you are not fond of Professor Snape, Harry, but there is no doubt that he saved Katie's life today. He was quite horrified to see her so stricken, there was no doubt of that. St. Mungo's staff are sending me hourly reports, and I am hopeful that Katie will make a full recovery in time."

Harry stayed silent for a moment, threatening to let the conversation die before he changed the subject.

"Where were you this weekend, sir?" Harry asked, disregarding a strong feeling that he was pushing his luck.

"I would rather not say just now," said Dumbledore. "However I shall tell you in due course."

Damn, that might have worked if I'd picked a different question. Or maybe not. Damn I wish I knew what I was doing.

"There is unfortunate news for me to tell you today though, Harry." Dumbledore started. "Nothing to grieve, don't fear, but it is certainly displeasing. Mundungus, while a valuable Order member, had been treating your inheritance with light-fingered contempt." He said lightly, and Harry found himself cursing the man's flowery language with much harsher terms.

"He's stealing from me? Sirius's possessions?" Harry made out finally, pushing his anger down.

"Not anymore, you may rest assured that he will not be making away with any more of it. He has gone to ground, I rather think he dreads facing me."



"How much has he taken?" Harry asked, thinking about the piles he could transport with the use of bag-enlarging spells and apparation.

"Not much, I believe he feared to take anything that could shelter Dark magic, and anything that could be traced back to him."

Harry closed his eyes slowly, reminding himself that Sirius did not like anything associated with that house. It wasn't the possessions that was angering him, Harry realized quickly. It was the glaring symbol of Dumbledore's incompetence.

"He was your responsibility, sir." Harry accused as he opened his eyes. Dumbledore nodded slowly, the familiar look of guilt deepening in his eyes.

"I'm aware, Harry, and I apologize." Dumbledore replied.

"Don't apologize, get my stuff back." Harry ordered angrily before he caught himself. Even after he had his temper back under control, he didn't regret not biting his tongue. At least now he had a personal reason to be angry with the man.

"I'll do my best, Harry." Dumbledore replied. Harry nodded in acceptance, and waited for Dumbledore to move the conversation along.

"What concerns me now, is our lesson." Dumbledore started and Harry felt something tense in his shoulders start to relax. He felt out with his magic as Dumbledore pour fresh memories into the Pensieve on his desk, but couldn't feel the memory's magic outside of the magicked basin. The basin itself was a thick wall of containment charms curved around the stone's shape.

"You will remember, I am sure, that we left the tale of Lord Voldemort's beginnings at the point where the handsome Muggle

Tom Riddle, had abandoned his wife and returned to his family home in Little Hangleton. Merope was left alone in London, expecting the baby who would one day become Lord Voldemort."

"London, sir?" Harry asked quickly, wondering if he'd forgotten the detail, and already set to kick himself for it.

"Yes, I found that out almost by chance, and with the help of one Caractacus Burke, who helped found the shop Borgin and Burkes, which is an old pawn shop in Knockturn Alley."

Dumbledore swilled the contents of the Pensieve in small circles, much as a gold prospector sifts for gold, until a little old man slowly revolved his way out of the silvery mass and began to speak through thatch of hair that completely covered his eyes.

"Yes, we acquired it in curious circumstances. It was brought in by a young witch just before Christmas, oh, many years ago now. She said she needed the gold badly, well, that much was obvious. Covered in rags and pretty far along...Going to have a baby, see. She said the locket had been Slytherin's. Well, we hear that sort of story all the time, 'Oh, this was Merlin's, this was, his favorite teapot', but when I looked at it, it had his mark all right, and a few simple spells were enough to tell me the truth. Of course, that made it near enough priceless. She didn't seem to have any idea how much it was worth. Happy to get ten Galleons for it. Best bargain we ever made!"

Dumbledore gave the Pensieve an extra-vigorous shake and Caractacus Burke descended back into the swirling mass of memory from whence he had come.

Looks like Borgin and Burkes tests everyone with crappy deals. Harry thought, thinking about the rosewood wand in his belt holster.

"Caractacus Burke was obviously not famed for his generosity," said Dumbledore.

So how'd you get him to give you the memory? Harry questioned nervously, before reminding himself that it didn't much matter, if it were truly necessary. Harry couldn't bring himself to feel much sympathy for a man who'd cheated a pregnant woman and thrown her back on the street.

"So we know that, near the end of her pregnancy, Merope was alone in London and in desperate need of gold, desperate enough to sell her one and only valuable possession, the locket that was one of Marvolo's treasured family heirlooms.

"It's strange to see a witch like that." Harry mentioned, almost to himself. "Did she stop using magic?" Harry asked, wondering at the decision.

At eleven years old, when he'd first made a feather float, magic had opened the world up for him. Magic meant he didn't have to live in a cupboard anymore, and it had colored every daydream he could come up with. But magic meant something different now. Harry felt out with his magic and explored the room, and remembered when he used to feel so much curiosity about magic. That feeling was dying now, replaced with a need to get out of the school and into the war. Even when he'd been outside feeling nature, there was that context there that everything he learned was meant to help him kill. He didn't want to feel curious about anything to do with death.

"I believe that when her husband abandoned her, Merope stopped using magic, yes. I do not think that she wanted to be a witch any longer. Of course, it is also possible that her unrequited love and the attendant despair sapped her of her powers; that can happen. In any case, as you are about to see, Merope refused to raise her wand even to save her own life." Dumbledore answered.

Harry nodded distantly, still wrapped in his own thoughts.

"How'd she die, sir?" Harry asked finally, when he'd managed to refocus his attention on their conversation.

"In childbirth, though she managed to stay alive long enough to name her son Tom Marvolo Riddle."

"Did she have a choice?" Harry asked, guessing that St. Mungos would have easily been able to save her life.

"She did, Merope Riddle chose death in spite of a son who needed her, but do not judge her too harshly, Harry." Dumbledore answered as he stood up from his desk. "This time, we are going to enter my memory. After you, Harry..."

This time? That means he wasn't the one to convince Burke to give up the memory. Harry concluded as he bent over the Pensieve and examined the memory's magic. It greatly resembled the 'pure' magic he'd felt outside, though not as powerful.

Harry felt his feet hit firm ground and opened his eyes to see a bustling, old-fashioned London street.

"There I am." said Dumbledore brightly, pointing ahead of them to a much younger Albus Dumbledore, who was walking steadily towards a rather grim, square building surrounded by high railings.

They went inside and Harry watched Dumbledore subtly imperius his way to talk to the young Tom Riddle, who had quite obviously been accepted for Hogwarts since birth. It wasn't surprising that Tom was described as a kind of budding sociopath, though Harry winced to hear about the boy hanging rabbits from rafters. He wondered to himself what had happened to the two children, 'Amy Benson and Dennis Bishop' when they went into a cave with the very young future Dark lord, that made them come out 'not quite right'.

Can children be born cruel?

Harry was shocked when Dumbledore opened Tom Riddle's door to find a pale boy in a bare, gray room. He didn't know what he'd been expecting, but it was strange to see Lord Voldemort as a skinny tiny-looking little kid sitting cross-legged on an orphanage bed, looking distrustful and angry.

The Dark lord potential in him was so obvious it was almost painful.

Suddenly the memories of Tom Riddle took on a second wanted to see what Dumbledore had done.

Did Dumbledore ever try and prevent Tom Riddle from becoming a Dark Lord? Surely he'd been able to foresee it? Or did he simply have no idea what happened to unwanted children?

He left me with the Dursleys, Harry was sharply reminded as he took in Tom's handsome and hesitate face.

He's too skinny too. Harry thought, watching Tom and Dumbledore shake hands.

"I'm Professor Dumbledore."

"Professor?" repeated Riddle. He looked wary. "Is that like 'doctor'? What are you here for? Did she get you in to have a look at me?"

Tom pointed at the door as he referred to the orphanage's keeper.

No, no." said Dumbledore, smiling.

Harry almost hated the headmaster for smiling right then. What the hell was there to smile about?

"I don't believe you," said Riddle. "She wants me looked at, doesn't she? Tell the truth!"

He spoke the last three words with a ringing force that was almost shocking. Harry knew he couldn't detect magic in someone else's memory, but he hadn't felt the loss so forcefully before. Now he could feel his mind struggle to reach out with his magic and feel the accidental 'imperius' that was surely in Tom's voice. What would a wandless imperius be like?

Tom meanwhile was glaring at Dumbledore. When the boy dropped the angry expression, he just looked scared.

"Who are you?"

"I have told you. My name is Professor Dumbledore, and I work at a school called Hogwarts. I have come to offer you a place at my school—your new school, if you would like to come."

Riddle leapt from the bed and backed away from Dumbledore, looking furious now.

"You can't kid me! The asylum, that's where you're from, isn't it? 'Professor,' yes, of course—, well I'm not going, see? That old cat's the one who should be in the asylum. I never did anything to little Amy Benson or Dennis Bishop, and you can ask them, they'll tell you!" Tom insisted fearfully.

"Do they call you a freak here too?" Harry asked Tom quietly, surprised for a moment when Tom didn't turn to face him at all, but instead continued sneering at the young Dumbledore.

Duh, someone else's memory, Harry reminded himself, and saw the silver-haired Dumbledore that he knew turn to him with an unfathomably sad expression on his face.

Harry stared back into Dumbledore's eyes, thinking off all the times the Dursleys had openly abused him, almost wanting Dumbledore to

invade his mind and see it all.

Meanwhile the younger Dumbledore was asking Riddle what sorts of things he could do. Harry turned back to the scene, curious about how Tom would answer.

How damaged is this kid?

"All sorts," breathed Riddle. A flush of excitement was rising up his neck into his hollow cheeks, making him look fevered. "I can make things move without touching them. I can make bad things happen to people who annoy me. I can make them hurt if I want to."

Tom's thin legs were trembling. He stumbled forward and sat down on the bed again, staring at his hands, his head bowed as though in prayer.

"I knew I was different," he whispered to his own quivering fingers. "I knew I was special. Always, I knew there was something."

"Well, you were quite right," said Dumbledore. "You are a wizard."

Riddle lifted his head. His face was transfigured: There was a wild happiness upon it, yet for some reason it did not make him better looking; on the contrary, his finely carved features seemed somehow rougher, his expression almost bestial.

"Are you a wizard too?" Tom asked.

"Yes, I am." Dumbledore answered. Tom looked disappointed, and scared again.

He already wants his power to mean he's better. He wants to be noticed, Dumbledore you damn well better notice him for something different than his power by the end of this. Compliment him, give him cake like Hagrid did for me. Get him out of this place, its destroying

him.

"Prove it," Riddle was demanding in the 'imperius' tone Harry had heard him use before.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows, "If, as I take it, you are accepting your place at Hogwarts--"

"Of course I am!"

"Then you will address me as 'Professor' or 'sir'." Dumbledore ordered.

"You manipulative fool, you didn't even tell him there were other magical schools, you made it like this was his only chance to get out of being miserable!" Harry snarled, before realizing that all of his angry words at the younger Dumbledore were very much so heard by the elder.

"In those days, schools chose their own students, there was no choice. Hogwarts took in the decendents of pureblood families, it was a matter of prestige, and once one school chose a born wizard, no other school would presume to do the same." Dumbledore replied quietly.

Harry turned to the Dumbledore he knew and glared at him.

"And you knew perfectly well how much power you held over Tom right here." Harry accused, hearing his aggressive tone and liking it. He hoped Dumbledore could hear his anger, he wanted the man to hear all of it, for once.

Harry turned back to focus on Tom, whose anger had fled into an unrecognizably polite voice.

"I'm sorry, sir. I meant— please, Professor, could you show me—"



Riddle pleaded.

The younger Dumbledore took out his wand, and pointed it at Tom's shabby wardrobe.

The wardrobe burst into flames.

"Yeah, teach him how much damage magic can do, that's great." Harry sneered at the elder Dumbledore.

It almost shocked him out of the Pensieve entirely when he remembered the thrill he'd felt, seeing Dudley run around with a pig's tail. The Dudleys had screamed, and Harry had laughed, but of course they'd screamed, Dudley was a ten year old child..

By the time Harry got his thoughts around himself to pay attention to the passing scene once more, Dumbledore was manipulating Riddle into admitting to thievery.

"You will return them to their owners with our apologies," said Dumbledore calmly, putting his wand back into his jacket. "I shall know whether it has been done. And be warned: Thieving is not tolerated at Hogwarts."

Unsurprisingly, Riddle did not look remotely abashed; he was still staring coldly and appraisingly at Dumbledore. At last he said in colorless voice, "Yes, sir."

Well manipulated, Dumbledore, he's yours now. Harry thought angrily, watching Tom slip into his blank face and empty voice, answering 'yes sir' to Dumbledore's cheerfully-placed demands.

"Where do you buy spellbooks?" Tom interrupted, his blank mask breaking when Dumbledore handed him a leather money-pouch. Tom's face was filled with greed and happiness. Harry remembered the wonder he'd felt at seeing his vault, the freedom he'd found there,

and almost smiled for Tom before he remembered who exactly he was seeing. Then there seemed to be very little worth smiling about in what he was seeing.

How much did Dumbledore plan to get me to turn out powerful and needy, like Tom Riddle but on the 'Light's' side?

"In Diagon Alley," said Dumbledore. "I have your list of books and school equipment with me. I can help you find everything--"

"You're coming with me?" asked Riddle, looking up from his new coins.

"Certainly, if you --"

"I don't need you," said Riddle. "I'm used to doing things for myself, I go round London on my own all the time. How do you get to this Diagon Alley – sir?" he added, catching Dumbledore's eye.

Harry thought that Dumbledore would insist upon accompanying Riddle, but once again he was surprised. Dumbledore handed Riddle the envelope containing his list of equipment, and after telling Riddle exactly how to get to the Leaky Cauldron from the orphanage, he said, "You will be able to see it, although Muggles around you – non-magical people, that is--, with not. Ask for Tom the barman—easy enough to remember, as he shares your name –"

Riddle gave an irritable twitch, as though trying to displace an irksome fly.

"You dislike the name 'Tom'?" Dumbledore asked.

"There are a lot of Toms." muttered Riddle. Then, as though he could not suppress the question, as though it burst from him in spite of himself, he asked, "Was my father a wizard? He was called Tom Riddle too, they've told me."

"I'm afraid I don't know," said Dumbledore, his voice gentle.

"My mother can't have been magic, or she wouldn't have died," said Riddle, more to himself than Dumbledore. "It must've been him. So – when I've got all my stuff – when do I come to this Hogwarts?"

"All the details are on the second piece of parchment in your envelope," said Dumbledore. "You will leave from King's Cross Station on the first of September. There is a train ticket in there too."

Riddle nodded. Dumbledore got to his feet and held out his hand again. Taking it, Riddle said, "I can speak to snakes. I found out when we've been to the country on trips – they find me, they whisper to me. Is that normal for a wizard?"

Harry watched the tiny wizarding boy wondering which Tom had wanted more back then, to be normal, or to be special.

"It is unusual," said Dumbledore, after a moment's hesitation. "but it is not unheard of."

His tone was casual but his eyes moved curiously over Riddle's face. They stood for a moment, man and boy, staring at each other, before Dumbledore moved to the door.

"Goodbye, Tom. I shall see you at Hogwarts."

"I think that will do," said the white-haired Dumbledore at Harry's side. Harry felt his anger drain as he realized the memory was ending, and seconds later, he was soaring weightlessly through darkness once more, before landing squarely in the present-day office.

The first thing Harry did when he got his bearings was take a sip from his polyjuice flask. He didn't know how long he'd been in the polyjuice, but he knew instinctively that his private alarm was about to sound.

"Sit down." Said Dumbledore as he pulled his face from the pensieve, his tone unreadable.

Harry found himself, for the first time in his life, horridly scared of Dumbledore. He'd been so angry with the man, for using eleven-year old Tom, that he'd shown his anger without thinking, without being prepared to deal with the consequences; Dumbledore could refuse to teach him more about Voldemort, just when Harry was starting to understand what he was dealing with. Harry felt sick with the thought, and was grateful Dumbledore had ordered him to sit down.

Harry fell into the chair behind him, though his entire body was itching to stand up and leave. He wanted to be alone. He feared Dumbledore's anger too much for that, he needed this information, and he promised himself that he'd sit and talk with Dumbledore for as long as the old man wanted, but he couldn't stop his hand from twitching with impatience. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, doing his best to fake the relaxation he used to feel in his headmaster's office.

"I returned to Hogwarts after that, intending to keep an eye on him, something I should have done in any case, given that he was alone in friendless, but which, already, I felt I ought to do for others' sake as much as his." Dumbledore started speaking, as if Harry had never spoken out of turn.

Is he just used to my temper making a fool of me? Harry asked himself, not liking the implication.

He opened his eyes to glance at the headmaster, and found Dumbledore gazing back at him.

"His powers, as you heard, were surprisingly well-developed for such a young wizard and – most interesting and ominously of all – he had already discovered that he had some measure of control over them,

and begun to use them consciously. And as you saw, they were not the random experiments typical of young wizards: he was already using magic against other people, to frighten, to punish or to control. The little stories of the strangled rabbit and the young boy and girl he lured into a cave were worrisome, not to mention his claim 'I can make them hurt if I want to.'"

"I hope you noticed Riddle's reaction when I mentioned that another shared his first name, 'Tom'?"

Harry nodded slowly, before closing his eyes again and leaning back in his chair.

"There he showed his contempt for anything that tied him to other people, anything that made him ordinary. Even then, he wished to be different, separate, notorious. He shed his name, as you know, within a few short years of that conversation, and created the mask of "Lord Voldemort" behind which he had been hidden for so long."

"I trust that you also noticed that Tom Riddle was already highly self-sufficient, secretive, and apparently, friendless? He did not want help or companionship on his trip to Diagon Alley. He preferred to operate alone. The adult Voldemort is the same. You will hear many of his Death Eaters claiming that they are in his confidence, that they alone are close to him, even understand him. They are deluded. Lord Voldemort has never had a friend, no do I believe that he has ever wanted one."

"And lastly-- I hope you are not sleepy to pay attention to this, Harry--" Dumbledore paused, and Harry obeyed the cue to sit up and open his eyes.

"The young Tom Riddle liked to collect trophies. You saw the box of stolen articles he had hidden in his room. These were taken from victims of his bullying behavior, souvenirs, if you will, of particularly unpleasant bits of magic. Bear in mind this magpie-like tendency, for

this, particularly, will be important later."

Harry nodded, memorizing the information quickly and shifted in his seat in a silent signal that he was ready to leave. He could tell from Dumbledore's office window that it had been night for awhile, and had a feeling he was skirting curfew.

"I'm afraid I must try your patience a bit longer, Harry." Dumbledore started, obviously having recognized his motion to leave.

"Yes sir?" Harry prompted, leaning forward in his seat slightly.

"I think I should explain to you better why I placed you with the Dursleys, Harry." Dumbledore explained, speaking gently now.

Harry shook his head slowly. No way did he want to have that conversation. For years he'd wanted Dumbledore to recognize how they treated him, and to take him out. But he'd done that for himself now, and he wasn't going back no matter what Dumbledore had to say.

Harry was about to lever himself out of his seat, when he remembered that he'd promised to sacrifice anything. That included spending time with the Dursleys; he'd count himself blessed if that was the worst action he'd set himself up to do for the war.

"Is this about the war, sir?" Harry asked quietly.

"No, Harry. I just want you to know that I know they did not treat you as well as they could have, but I left you there out of concern for your greater safety. I care a good deal for you Harry, I did not want to leave you there." Dumbledore professed.

"I see, thank you sir." Harry answered, hearing his voice go stiff. "May I go to bed now, sir? It is late." He requested, even as he stood up.

"Very well, by all means." Dumbledore responded with a small smile.

The ring's gone. Harry noticed, as he passed the table where Gaunt's ring had sat the time before. He considered asking Dumbledore about it, but decided against it. Dumbledore rarely responded to his questions, and when he did, Harry never understood his 'answers' anyway. He was exhausted and frustrated, and didn't know how much control he had over his obviously wild temper. He wanted to sink himself into his wandless training and never leave it.

He skipped class the next day, in favor of studying in the Room of Requirement. He had finally started to learn real wandless magic, but he had to concentrate on it more than he was used to doing, and he couldn't cast anything with his left hand.

He had to go back to the basics for his left hand, and start with motionless spells like 'accio'. He kept his right hand held behind his back. It took him an hour to learn how to keep objects from 'accio'ing around his body and into his hidden hand, and another to get anything to even twitch when he wasn't accidentally casting with his right.

By Wednesday's training session, when Moody again didn't arrive, Harry had finally mastered his basic spells with his right hand, most importantly including bone mending charms, so he could again take up Moody's challenge. He knew for a fact that if he didn't master every goal Moody set for him, the trainer would walk away and never teach him anything again. He had to learn how to master pain.

So that night he put his wand to his palm, whispered 'dextra', and started to learn how to fight through pain. He quickly decided learning to suffer in silence would come later, if it ever did. For now, he'd scream.

Harry nodded to Moody the next Monday, and knew he had his trainer back. He'd come to a impasse when it came to pain.

It was like Vernon, he figured. He mostly understood it, he'd learned to live with it, but he was never going to like it.

"Son of a bitch, you actually did it." Moody said as Harry wandlessly healed his broken hand. He'd fought for an hour with it broken before he decided Moody had seen enough of his new-trained endurance.

Harry scoffed a laugh and nodded, absently rubbing at the renewed bones in his hand. They itched, but he didn't want to scourgify it away.



He'd earned the itch.

"Did you break it yourself?" Moody asked incredulously.

"Every day this week." Harry answered calmly, throwing a fireball back and forth between his hands. It was becoming a habit, for when he was studying alone and had nothing better to do with his wandless magic.

"Damn I wish I'd wasted more time with you." Moody responded. Harry looked up at him and gently rose an eyebrow.

"I'd have liked to watch." He expounded.

"Right." Harry said with disgust. "Of course."

"Hey boy, don't you dare use that sarcasm with me, I'm making you what you are." Moody growled, pointing at him with a darkly-stained hand.

"You're sadistic." Harry responded, careful to avoid all traces of sarcasm. Moody barked a laugh at him.

"No, I just enjoy seeing Dumbledore's idiot wonder boy in pain."

"What's the difference then?" Harry asked.

"Eh?"

"Between being sadistic and enjoying seeing me in pain." Harry clarified.

"You, essentially." Moody answered as he limped towards his chair by the door. He got himself settled, and started rubbing the juncture where his fake leg met his knee.

Right.

That day Moody started him on dueling practice for real. The Room stopped sending out random spells, and left the two of them alone to fight. Harry wasn't sure how useful the training was; he was sure they lost an hour a day to Moody's sadistic cackles and insane phases when he'd be shooting everything in sight and twitching at every sound. Usually while they fought Harry knew that he'd be able to stop the entire fight by pulling his left hand behind his back and bringing his wandless shielding into the fight, but instead he allowed Moody to believe that he was still a capable duelist, and in return, Moody taught him speed.

Speed was something insanity had not taken from Moody's fighting. The man was physically slow, thanks to his ancient muggle-style wooden leg, but when it came to magic, the man could send off three times as many spells as Harry managed, and he did it without a single wandmotion or incantation. It was unlike the unpredictable spells that Harry took on with both hands. Moody was a single, almost unmoving target, and on that first day Harry didn't manage to send off a single well-aimed offensive spell.

At the end of the session, Moody offered to give him the 'only way in hell' he was going to become worthy of the Order, and threw him a vial of a bright-pink potion.

"You look like you've never worked a day in your life, and you fight worse. With the way you sleep, this will practically give you another seven days a week. It's called Mandrake Potion. Take a swallow a day." Moody barked, calling over the click-thump of his uneven stride.

"What does it do?" Harry called from his blood-covered place on the floor. To his surprise Moody just lifted a hand and flipped him off as he continued out. The Room of Requirement door clicked behind him.

Harry stored the vial in his clothes, and left the Room of Requirement to ask it for a library. He came back in and accio'd books on Advanced Potions. It took him an hour to find the potion, because Moody had misnamed it, it was called Mandrake Draught, the same that Snape had used in second year to wake the petrified.

Why in the hell..?

Harry looked at the Potion in his hand, and looked in another book, hoping to learn about alternate or original uses.

Mandrake Draught.

c. 900 A.D, England, Original Brewer Unknown

Originally brewed as a auxiliary means of torture via sleep deprivation, Mandrake Draught would be given in high doses, up to 4 ml a day to a victim in order to induce a constant state of awareness. Outlawed in the 1800s, the drug started to be used in the 1940s by students and businessmen to increase attention span and reduce stress-related health symptoms, and in rare cases, to stop sleeping entirely. Effects of sleep deprivation under the Mandrake Draught may include headaches, exhaustion, muscle aches and cramps, boils, skin infections, loss of appetite, diarrhea, dehydration, insomnia and short term memory loss.

It is rumored that in extremely high concentration, Mandrake Draught can wake up the petrified, but claims currently remain unsubstantiated.

When properly brewed, Mandrake Draught is a thin, fuchsia liquid.

Harry read the symptoms list, wincing.

This is not going to be fun, Harry thought. He'd already made up his mind. The Potion would save him the three hours a day he spent

sleeping, and perhaps even boost his awareness and ability to learn. He had no choice really, if he wasn't willing to sacrifice his friends' lives for his own continued comfort. He'd learned the price of laziness already, and it was too high.

He drank the swallowful Moody had gave him, and waited for it to take effect. Within minutes he was grinning, and feeling ready to get back to work. He felt more than just aware again, he felt strong. Harry breathed in, and felt his lungs expand and contract easily. His persistent headache was fading, the constant ache in his muscles was gone. Harry ran outside into the 7th floor hallway and practically yelled aloud asking for his training room back.

He ran in and jumped out of the way of a coming spell. He was alive again, and he needed more of the potion.

It wasn't hard to figure out a way to get an illegal potion at Hogwarts. After all, he'd done it before. He knew what he was about to do again was immoral, but wars usually were, and again, the price for clear-cut principles was too high.

"Dobby. I've got a favor to ask of you." Harry called into the dark library, already panting in exertion, but holding a wandless shield over himself easily. A crack and a squeak heralded Dobby's arrival.

"Master Harry Potter, sir!" Dobby squealed, obviously thrilled. "Dobby is happy to Help Harry Potter sir!

"Yeah, Dobby, would you get me a load of Mandrake Draught?" Harry asked confidently.

"Mandrake Draught, Sir?" Dobby cocked his head as he spoke, obviously not quite understanding.

"I'm sure there is some in Madam Pomfrey's medicine cabinet. If not, try Snape's potions storage." Harry ordered.

"Dobby likes Professor Dumbledore very much too sir, and is proud to keep his rules for him. We is not supposed to take from professors' storages, sir." Dobby answered, his ears slowly flopping down in sadness.

"It's not against the rules. I wouldn't make you do that." Harry lied. "Would you help me?"

""Dobby is a free house-elf and he can trust anyone he likes and Dobby can do anything Harry Potter says he can do!" Dobby declared happily.

"Good. Leave them in my trunk when you've got them." Harry ordered, and saw Dobby's ears lift up slightly in his happiness. Dobby popped from sight, still smiling broadly.

Harry's good mood was gone. He wanted to curl up and cry, or, absurdly, run outside and punch something. Dobby had never even thought that Harry Potter might be lying about the rules. It wasn't hard to sacrifice his time and energy to train his mind, or sacrifice his money to buy illegal wands, but the only way for him to defeat the Dark Lord was to sacrifice his definition of 'good', and despite all his determination to do it, Harry wasn't sure he'd be able. Harry could barely stand lying to a house-elf for the greater good, he didn't understand how he'd ever manage to look a man in the eyes and kill him.

Harry threw himself back into his training.

The next week a small bottle of the bright pink acrid-smelling potion appeared in his clothes trunk.

This time after he went up to his dorm to say goodnight to McGonagall, he went straight to the bathroom and conjured a teaspoon. He measured carefully, following the directions he'd found

in the Dark Arts potions textbook he'd found the potion's name in. The potion was originally designed as a torture device, so Harry was sure to measure out a 'medicinal' portion carefully. It wasn't really important to him why the potion was developed-it would allow him to learn faster and be more aware, without the need to sleep. He could train twenty four hours a day now, and that was all that mattered.

The potion got better as time past. At first he just didn't have to sleep anymore, but the affects started to build. His mind was sharper, faster, more awake than ever. He felt like suddenly he could focus, suddenly he could think, and his studying got faster. He was going to buy Dobby a wardrobe--the potion was perfect for him. Its side effects all seemed minor. He was cold all the time, but he magically heated his instant coffee and spelled his jumpers to stay warm and soon forgot about the cold entirely.

By the end of the second week, nothing was painful anymore. His thoughts didn't stray, didn't poke at him about guilt or stupidity or Sirius's death, because he had a book in front of him, or a spell to practice, and that was all there was. Training was the only thing he wanted or needed to do, so as long as he was studying, he didn't want for anything.

He was getting better so quickly now, and he hated how much time he'd wasted dawdling without the potion. Harry started to feel how incantation words shaped his concentration on his magic, and so shaped the spell he was doing. He'd never had enough focus to feel that before, but it was excellent, the theory behind silent and motionless magic made sense. All he had to do to make a spell was concentrate on how he wanted the magic to shape itself, and if he had the focus, he wouldn't need words or wandmotions or even a wand at all. He'd been able to do such things for months, but it was reassuring to feel how the theory worked.

His real skin was turning a little yellow, he noticed that Friday when he forgot to take his polyjuice in the Room of Requirement, but it

wasn't like it was any reason to panic. Being pretty wasn't his concern anymore, as made obvious by his now dread-locked hair. He had no question that he couldn't take out the two-month-old braids.

That Friday was also when he noticed that he was quickly running out of Mandrake Draught, and that was reason to panic. Dobby would have given him all that he could possibly find at Hogwarts. There was no way he'd survive going back to living without the Draught, wasting three hours a day to sleep. He couldn't even stand the thought.

He blessed Dumbledore for marking that Friday as a Hogsmeade weekend, and signed up to go that Saturday.

He took a carriage to the beginning of town, and made sure it had driven away before he entered The Three Broomsticks. Inside he paid for enough Floo powder to get to Diagon Alley's Leaky Caldron, and stepped through the fireplace into the familiar pub. This time, without his wig, wizards and witches throughout the pub noticed and greeted him. He smiled and shook hands as he continued briskly through the crowd, to the back alley behind.

It was wizard etiquette not to watch as people made their way through to Diagon Alley, as poking different codes in the brick opened the wall onto different sections of the alleyway and a wizard's direction was to remain his own. Harry was grateful of the strange etiquette that stopped the crowd of fans by the doorway, and allowed him to close the door behind them. He transfigured a few pebbles from the ground into his familiar gray wig in a prayer to avoid any further fan introductions and folded his polyjuiced black hair beneath it.

Harry tapped in the code Hagrid had taught him, as he didn't know any others, and walked through to the entrance of Diagon Alley.

He only knew one shop in Knockturn Alley, but he'd started to think

Borgin and Burkes held everything under the sun, as long as it was illegal, and if not, he was sure they would order anything for him, as long as he never directly requested it.

It was strange, hearing someone in Borgin and Burkes when he entered. He'd started thinking of the shop as a quiet, private place. This short, blond-haired costumer was being neither.

"-And you've yet to send me any instructions on how to do it!" The costumer was yelling in an angry, sneering voice that Harry recognized immediately. Harry quickly cast illusion charms over his face to keep Draco from recognizing him while allowing Mr. Borgins to see the same gray-haired boy who'd ordered books from him weeks before. He was grateful he'd never seen Draco in the store before, he'd only mastered the person-specific disguise charms a few weeks before.

"I still need a description of the damage on it, assuming you still can't bring it into the shop." Borgin replied politely.

"It needs to stay put, I told you that weeks ago!" Malfoy snarled. "If I get it fixed, I won't be able to bring it back in, and then what use will it be? You need to either come with me, as you've so graciously refused, or teach me how to do it. How complicated can this be, or is there less purity in your veins as you so claim?" Malfoy pulled his lip up in disgust.

"With only a description of its damages, I can't guarantee anything." Mr. Borgin replied carefully, obviously repeating what he'd said before.

Harry saw the dealer lick his lips nervously, and glance over at him. Harry nodded back, agreeing to wait.

The dealer looked like he'd just seen a miracle, and nodded gratefully at him. Harry watched, wanting to know what Draco was



doing there.

"I'm not asking for much, you little fool. Keep the one safe, fix the other. I know you are quite devoted to this project, just get it done already!" Malfoy sneered.

"I need a description of the damages, sir! I know nothing about it. What would you have me do?" The dealer replied, scrunching his neck down into his shoulders as if he could hide.

"I'd have you come with me and help me fix the bloody thing, but I can hardly even get into the Room anymore with Po-" Draco cut himself off. "People always inside, locking me out." He revised. "So you will need to get off your arse, and give me a list of every possible way to fix any possible way it could be broken. Trust me, you will be paid grandly for your expertise." Here Draco sneered. "After me of course." He added proudly.

What is Draco up to?

"By the time I get back, you should have it done." Draco ordered, before turning swiftly.

Harry almost broke out in a grin when he saw Draco jerk away from him, obviously startled to find someone else in the room. Apparently he hadn't even noticed the door's alarm spell ringing as Harry had entered.

"Good evening," Draco greeted politely as he passed. Harry almost gawked after him, from hearing the polite tone.

Harry nodded in return for the greeting, aware that Draco would recognize his voice. Harry waited until he heard the door's ring announce Draco's exit, glanced back to confirm it, and approached the counter.

"So I should take it there's something here I'm not allowed to buy?" Harry asked, carefully sounding as annoyed as he could.

"Just that Vanishing Cabinet Sir, just that one specifically and it's partner is broken anyway, I can order you a pair any time if you'd like, there's a very good design selling in-"

Harry held up a hand to stop Borgin's nervous tangent, and went over to inspect the Vanishing Cabinet Draco had wanted. It looked on a face of it to be an ordinary dish cabinet in its size and shape, except of course for its lack of shelves. They were meant to transport people straight into warded places, such as protected homes. They'd been used in times of war for generations, as a way to run away into a place where the enemy could not find you, not if you destroyed the Vanishing Cabinet on the other side, anyway.

Is Draco scared about the coming war?, Harry thought, thinking about Draco's nearly constant disheveled appearance at school. He'd looked better just then, but Draco would be too proud to leave Hogwarts during a napalm bombing if he wasn't yet perfectly dressed.

Harry looked out of the side of the counter, and saw Borgin eying him nervously.

Better put the man out of his misery.

Harry approached the counter, thinking about how he wanted to go about the next negotiation, he didn't care if he wasted money, but he needed to keep the man's respect if he was going to get good quality of anything he bought here.

"Here's the deal, Mr. Borgin. I want Mandrake Draught, I don't want to go to the main sources and have questions poured over me, and I don't want to go wandering down Knockturn Alley to get it at a good price. So, if you've got it, I'm buying it from you. You name your price,

I buy it at whatever price you put down. If it's a good price, I might very well need something convenient like this again." Harry said, doing his best to sound like a knowledgeable adult used to a bartering society for once.

As if I know what the main sources are or where to go in Knockturn Alley. Harry thought, safe in his occlumency.

"A respectable deal, Sir. How much would you like?" The dealer responded.

He has it here?. Harry thought, surprised and relieved.

"1600 ml" Harry guessed.

If nothing else, that'll get me through to the next Hogsmeade trip in November.

The dealer nodded at him, walked behind the curtained doorway to the back of his shop, and returned with three large corked vials of the bright-pink liquid to place gently on the counter. Harry recognized the potion instantly, and had to fight back a grin.

"That will be 1500 galleons for the draught, Sir" Mr. Borgin stated, slipping the potion vials into a silk envelope.

Following etiquette, Borgin quietly handed Harry a small burlap bag to transfer galleons into. Harry tucked it into his shoulder bag, and pretended to use his wand to *accio* 1500 galleons from his money-bag into the burlap without ever having to bring his money bag into the public area. Harry gratefully handed the bag back, stored his potion away, and went on his way. With this to help him, he might even be good enough for the Order before Christmas.

Perhaps I'll propose it then, Harry thought as he left the Three Broomsticks and joined the Hogsmeade crowd. He hailed a carriage

to bring him back to Hogwarts as quickly as possible, and turned his thoughts back to what more he needed to learn.

It was that night that Hermione interrupted him during his training in the Room of Requirement. Harry was working on a frustrating wandless eviscerating hex when her voice startled him out of his concentration.

"Harry, I need to talk to you." Hermione said.

"Hermione, I need to work." Harry replied automatically, slowly settling himself back into his concentration.

"No." She replied, almost like an order.

Harry looked up in surprise and saw a determined look in her eyes.

Damn it.

He knew better than to argue more, it would only waste more time. He dropped his focus, letting out a frustrated sigh and gesturing for her to continue.

Please let this be quick. I am quite seriously not in the mood for distractions.

"Harry, you love me, right?" Hermione asked, instantly sounding about to cry. Harry looked up again, startled and wondered what was going on. He wasn't good with guessing people's emotions, and that was only worse with girls.

"Yeah..." Harry answered, hoping she'd explain whatever she needed to quickly. He hated to see her upset, but it was his job to keep her alive, and that was a bit more important than cheering her up on a bad day. Harry wasn't sure what to do, he didn't want to tell her to go away-- he had no doubt that would hurt her and he'd

probably waste twice as much time having Ron yelling at him later, but he had to study so he could protect her...

"Just remember that with what I'm about to tell you, okay?" Hermione continued, her nose sniffing but her voice sounding clear again. Harry nodded slowly, still confused.

"Harry, if you don't promise to slow down with this training thing, I'm going to tell Dumbledore what's going on." Hermione said firmly.

Harry's thoughts cut off immediately, leaving him staring at her with his mouth agape.

In the train, he'd told her everything, she knew too much. He had thought he should tell the truth to his friends, he'd been young and immature, and he'd thought that there was something important about truth, even though he didn't know what it was anymore. It was illogical, but it had felt urgent.

Damn it, I listen to logic, not emotions.

It had backfired. Harry could hardly process it. She was betraying him. To Dumbledore. Hermione was going to betray him to Dumbledore.

"Hermione, if you do that, I'll never trust you again." Harry replied, hating how cold his voice sounded, but somehow at the same time wishing it could sound ever colder.

"Harry don't take it like that! I'm not betraying you! Really, I'd never do that. But look, Ron says you stay up all night, with a spell to hide the light hoping he won't notice. Your eyes are bloodshot, you look exhausted, I only see you in class, otherwise you're running into here. You're emaciated, you're sick, you can't do this."

"Yeah, I look like shit. How does that justify you betraying me

exactly?" Harry interrupted her, glad for once that his voice did reflect his actual emotion: anger.

"You're killing yourself Harry! What do you expect I do, sit back and watch?"

"Yes! That's exactly what you need to do. Remember that whole thing on the train, you promising to think like a soldier too now, if I had to, you would too? Fine then, think like a soldier. What is one man's life worth if his death can take out the Dark Lord?" Harry shot back.

"You say the Dark Lord now." Hermione noted quietly.

"To remind myself what I'm dealing with, what's your point?" Harry threw his words at her.

"Killing yourself now isn't going to help with Voldemort at all!" She argued.

"I'm not killing myself now, Hermione. I'm studying so I won't get killed. I need you to let me do that!" Harry demanded.

"You can't do this on your own Harry!" Hermione was yelling shrilly now. "I know you want to but you can't, you're sick, the whole school had been gossiping for weeks about what drugs you're taking. And the truth that you're here in this room every night instead of taking care of yourself is almost worse. You're running yourself into the ground."

You have a saving people thing. Harry's mind repeated at him.

"Yes, I'm tired and it's hard, Hermione. But guess what, that might be the only way everyone I love will live through this next year! Yeah, guess what, I don't think Voldemort is going to be laying low for much longer, which means he's going to be out to kill me again. How many

people do you think he'll plow through before he gets to me this time? Thirty? Forty?" Harry asked rhetorically. "So I've gotta go to him, forgive me if I don't dawdle through my training." Harry finished, glaring back at the wand in his hand and feeling for his magic, though he was unable to concentrate enough to think of a spell to practice with. He was furious but it didn't feel good this time.

"I know you have to train, it's just how you're doing it that frightens me." Hermione answered, sounding calm again.

"Which mean's you're going to tell everything I trusted you with to Dumbledore." Harry repeated, unable to believe it.

"If you don't slow down, yes."

"Get out, Hermione, I am in way too dangerous a mood for you to hang out here now convincing me you are going to do this."

"Harry, wait-" She sounded like she was going to cry again. Harry understood now.

"Leave Hermione."

"Harry, give me another choice! Tell me anything, tell me you are going to sleep more, eat a little more, slow down a bit."

"No." Harry answered shortly.

What am I going to do after she tells Dumbledore? Maybe she won't actually- Harry tried to stop lying to himself, if there was one thing he knew about Hermione, it was her diligence.

Damn it, Hermione!

"Alright." Harry answered, thinking up a better option than having Dumbledore suddenly paying too much attention to him. "Alright,

what if I tell a professor here, tell one professor that I am training myself to fight the Dark Lord, then will you forget this?"

To his relief, she nodded slowly.

"Okay. Okay I won't tell if you will." She gave in, smiling a little before running a hand over her face and wiping the relieved expression away.

She didn't want to do this, a forgiving part of him said. That sliver of forgiveness didn't last long before he remembered what she'd just tried to force him into.

"Then ask Snape in a week if he knows I'm training myself to be a hero." Harry ordered. She nodded.

"Hermione?" Harry called her attention back to him as he slowly put his book down and stood up.

"Yes?" She responded quickly.

"I suggest you get out, now." Harry said carefully, struggling to keep his temper under control until she left the room. As soon as the door clicked behind her, Harry's anger exploded into hexes that ripped apart the benign training room. Harry punched a wall and his magic ripped a hole all the way through it. Harry turned around and tore the sand targets to pieces by hand.

It was his response to losing people, Harry recognized, to destroy every inanimate object in sight. This time, for once, he didn't have to fix it again afterward. The Room of Requirement would give him new sand bags the next time he trained.

"Snape." Harry called in the hallway when he saw the professor in the hallway the next morning.



Snape turned in the hall at his name, but didn't even bother to respond once he'd seen who'd called for him.

"I'm making myself sick by working really hard to defeat the Dark Lord." Harry stated, doing his best to sound like one of his young classmates.

"I'm glowing with pride." Snape drawled, and continued on his way.

Harry nodded to himself, and returned to the Room of Requirement, fighting off a laugh, the crisis narrowly avoided.

Harry finally got through his last book on occlumency that night. He decided he'd continue his hour practice sessions every day, knowing the quiet meditation strengthened his mental barriers and helped him with his magical detection. As long as he was still continuing in both, he'd keep practicing, but at least now he didn't have to devote study time to the skill. He'd learned all of what little there was known of occlumency already. He thought perhaps only Dumbledore, Snape, and the sphinxes who'd originally discovered the power still had things to teach him about the art.

"I'm doing alright." Harry muttered to himself as he took his polyjuice and Mandrake Draught that morning. He hardly had to bother with the polyjuice anymore; he only left the Room of Requirement for Transfiguration, Defense, and meals in the Great Hall. He used the polyjuice 24-7 anyway. He could never know what friend would burst in on him unexpectedly to worry about him next. The polyjuice was expensive but he had a massive amount of galleons in his vault and he was willing to sacrifice them.

By the next week, he could cast all of his spells nearly as well wandlessly as with his wand. His rosewood wand was beginning to feel like a prop; he only took it out during his classes to hide his wandless magic. Spells like transfigurations that were primarily based on his concentration he found easier to cast without the wand

in his hand; it distracted him from focusing on what he wanted the magic to do, rather than what wandmotion or incantation he'd learned for the spell.

The Room of Requirement surrounded him with spells, and he could block them all at once, casting shields around himself in response to the magic he felt headed toward him. It gave him child-sized bags of sand to 'protect' while he fought, and he started fighting with his right hand while he cast shielding spells with his left. The Room of Requirement started pushing him harder, giving him harder and faster spells to block, and set him running and dodging through the gymnasium again to give himself time to identify and block the assortment of advanced spells attacking him.

It was that week that the dizziness and shaking started. He didn't mind the dizziness all too much in itself, but he couldn't hide the shaking in his hands. Hermione had started glaring at him and complaining loudly about Snape's irresponsibility every time Harry's fork or spoon clicked against his plate wrong or fell from his grip at table. Harry didn't dare try to push magic through his wand with his hands flailing about randomly, which meant he was left casting wandless magic around his wand, a surprisingly difficult feat to pull off.

By the next week, the 27th, when notices about the Christmas break started showing up around the school, Harry knew for sure that something was going wrong. He couldn't remember if he'd told Ron he wasn't going to the Burrow for the break, or when he'd last seen Ron at all, or even what the third class of compression charms designated. He was forgetting things, forgetting his schedule and his plans and his lessons.

That Saturday he spent three hours re-memorizing spells he'd known for weeks, only to discover by the end of the day that he'd forgotten most of them again. He spent that night working over his old books, concentrating even despite a headache that would have crippled him

months before. He was stronger now, he could deal with it.

By the end of that night he was starting to think pain tolerance was the only thing he'd really learned. The more he revised what he supposedly already knew, the more he seemed to forget. He was losing everything. It affected everything. His spells, his concentration. He tried to remember old spells and had to struggle with them. His head pounded in pain until he couldn't think past it, no matter how tolerant he'd become. It was like all his thoughts couldn't process anything but pain, he couldn't think of anything else, despite the book in front of him. His books were nothing, just objects, just series of squiggles that he couldn't make sense of, and didn't want to.

"DAMN IT!" Harry shouted, bringing the magic inside him up to his palms and pushing it out in a fireball spell.

All he released was smoke.

Harry stared at the thick dark mist settling into the air, and admitted to himself that he was scared. He was losing everything that made him strong. What would he do if he couldn't bring down the Dark Lord? Would the Order be able to manage it without their 'Chosen One'? Was the prophecy wrong?

That's possible. Harry thought hopefully as he mentally gathered his energy together to try the spell again.

The prophecy was made by Trelawney after all. And who could say what 'Dark Lord' it was referring to? Grindewald called himself the 'Dark Fuhrer' after all, it wouldn't be too surprising if another 'Voldemort' megalomaniac who called himself the 'Dark Lord' was 'vanquished' by some schmuck born in July.

Harry cast the fireball again and got a spark. He almost relaxed into his success before he remembered how destructive the spell was supposed to be.

God I hope the prophesy is wrong, Harry thought desperately, before he mentally slapped himself.

No. Harry ordered himself, gritting his teeth painfully. He would work past this, he would kill the Dark Lord, whether or not the prophesy was true. He wasn't working to fulfill some foolish woman's prophesy, he was working to keep his friends alive, and he wouldn't rest until he was finished doing that.

Harry stumbled out of the Room of Requirement, only noticing once he stood gasping in the hallway that he was feeling exhausted again. He hadn't felt tired since he'd started with the potion, but now it felt like the only thing his body was made for was lying down and sleeping. Harry left the Room of Requirement, deciding to replace his library with the training room. Hopefully semi-fatal spells heading for his chest would convince his magic to work when he focused on it.

I need the training room. I need the training room.

He couldn't stop just because it hurt. He'd take a thousand more spell wounds before having to mourn a friend again.

Harry stumbled back into the Room of Requirement. A single spell attacked him. He blocked it with the correct shield, but still he felt magic pass through the block he was concentrating on. The hex ripped straight into his shoulder. Harry stumbled from the push of it and fell to his back, barely catching himself with his right hand. He heard it crack when he landed, despite the light fall. Pain scrambled up his arm, and he dropped down to his elbow, only to fall straight into the path of an incoming spell. He choked back a scream as it burned its way through his chest. Harry looked down and saw his stomach gushing out blood--the spell had gone through him. Another slash opened in his leg as he pushed himself up to crawl and wasn't fast enough.

Harry pulled his way from the room, like a slug pushing along the floor, leaving a sticky trail of blood. He had just gotten the thin door closed behind him when he realized what he'd done. He'd run away. He couldn't just do that, he was the weapon, he had to fight, to train. Harry crouched outside in the hall, unable to walk back and forth before it.

I need to learn to be a weapon. I need to learn to be a weapon.

He went back in.

The door clicked too softly behind him. Harry wanted it to have slammed, a firm conclusion to what the Room had just told him.

You are not a weapon. You cannot learn to be a weapon.

He'd entered an infirmary room. A few low cots in rows, clean sheets, bright magicked lights, all mocking him.

What was going wrong? He'd been getting so good, mastering everything he'd set out to learn, studying twenty four hours a day.

He was like that wizard baby he'd seen at the World Cup tapping someone else's wand against a slug uselessly, playing at magic.

The Room of Requirement had delivered him a hospital room when he'd asked to train, because training him would be useless, and a fucking magical room had figured it out.

Fuck.

Blood was pouring out of him from somewhere. He couldn't cry, couldn't even crawl to the bed to hide under the sheets. His legs trailed behind him, too heavy to drag now. He was soaked. Cold. But blood was warm. That didn't make sense. He should feel warm. But cold, he was cold.

He thought he heard a door open but it was all mixed with a weird whooshing sound in his ears. It sounded like a wave, but it was only whooshing in, and in, and in. Maybe that was why he was cold, Harry thought, because he was wet. He didn't like being wet. It was cold. He was supposed to be warm.

~~HP~~

It was supposed to be warm, Harry thought ridiculously as he woke up. He had the sudden feeling that it was going to be fun to open his eyes, that there was something amusing to watch, and struggled to do so. But his eyes were heavy and were partly stuck together, but then he knew that that was okay, that was normal, and someone was taking care of it. He felt something wet and warm sponge over his face, unsticking his eyes. He tried to open them, there was something for him to watch!, but it was too hard, and he settled back down, wishing he didn't have to miss it.

Harry woke up and forced open his eyes. A white, clean ceiling spun in circles above him. But that wasn't right, there was supposed to be something fun to see. He knew it would be that way, there was something fun going on. Harry closed his eyes again, and tried to concentrate on that feeling that there was something fun to see, and he wanted to see it.

He heard laughing first. It was a cackling, animal-like sound that he associated with hyenas at the hunt. He opened his eyes, remembering that he wanted to, though he wasn't quite sure why.

Then sight came, with its colors and shapes and movement all at the same time. The color was red and black and brown, and it was all mixing together and moving frantically around. He couldn't remember why he couldn't see before, but now he could, and that was good. He felt tall and proud and glorious, and he liked what he was seeing. He was seeing something good. But no, there was something wrong

about it. Harry tried to look closer, to concentrate, because something didn't fit, and he didn't know what.

Red was fire, and a brown house behind it sat in the darkness. But no, the house was in the fire. But that was okay, that fit, houses could be in fire, what was wrong?

The laughter, the laughter was wrong. Laughter didn't match with burning houses. And his happiness, his happiness didn't fit either. He tried harder to understand.

And it clicked. It wasn't his laughter, it wasn't his happiness. He was Harry, and he didn't burn houses for no reason. That was someone else, someone else who didn't fit with anything in the world. That one whose laugh didn't sound like a hyena anymore, because hyenas were alive, and alive things could laugh, but that one was supposed to be dead. And he wasn't dead, he was Harry. Voldemort was supposed to be dead.

And then the world righted itself, and he could see.

Death Eaters were running around the house, laughing and calling to each other. They pointed and laughed and clapped each other's backs and Harry wondered how they recognized each other through the masks. They were everywhere.

Slowly Harry's vision turned and looked back at the house, now spitting flames meters above the roof. The scene then slowly shifted back toward the Death Eaters running through the village, and Harry figured out that he was seeing through Voldemort's eyes, and that the Dark Lord was turning his head. Death Eaters were running into houses together, and scrambling out, dragging muggle women and children by their hair. They were to be pushed into a pile in the middle of the town. They were in Barnton and the men were to be killed without further ado, Harry knew, though he didn't know when he'd learned it.

Harry watched a muggle woman scream and claw at her doorway as she was dragged from a brick-sided home. She was punched, but she didn't stop. Then Harry saw why; a wide-eyed, silent curly-blond-haired little girl was looking out from that doorway, one arm clamped over a little white My Little Pony like it was the most important thing in the world.

"HENTI!" The woman was screaming, kicking her limbs in every direction and pulling towards the house. "HENTI!"

Harry saw a stream of red light hit the woman, and her mouth clamped shut.

Harry pushed to try and escape through the Dark Lord's eyes, to appear at the scene so he could grab the woman and her child, and protect them while he wiped the scene clean of the monsters and their masks, but he didn't even feel anything to push against.

"Looks like you got yourself a screamer. You're a lucky one, Arsenius." A Death Eater called to the man dragging the now-silent woman.

"Nah, I'm for the silent crying type. Go grab the whelp, I'll bring her to the trees." 'Arsenius' replied.

Harry felt Voldemort's approval, felt his plans to raise Arsenius through the ranks. Harry wanted to throw up, wanted to wake up so he could puke the whole memory out of himself.

I'm asleep, Harry realized, and then he wasn't anymore.

A white ceiling spun around him. Harry tried to sit up to puke, but knew as soon as he tried that he wasn't going to make it. He couldn't even lift his head. Suddenly, his body was turned sideways, and his vision shifted to see a man-shaped blur sitting in front of him. Harry



wondered if he was still in Voldemort's head, and then he was throwing up.

Harry tried to stay in the white room that was so soft, but he couldn't keep his eyes open.

He went back to a pile of bodies. Harry tried to find the woman that he'd seen but he couldn't. All he saw were arms and legs lying over each other like dirty barbies in a toy bin. It's hard to find faces in a pile of bodies, Harry learned. All he could see were the limbs. He wondered, with that thought, where that My Little Pony was, where the children were. There were no small limbs in the pile. Harry tried to close his eyes, but Voldemort was still staring at his success, so Harry couldn't stop either.

"What now, my Lord? The night is young." A Death Eater asked him, and Harry recognized the voice. Arsenius.

Harry felt a stirring of anger at the name.

Voldemort was pleased.

"You pick, Jugson." Voldemort replied. It was strange hearing that hiss of a voice surround Harry in his thoughts, detached from everything that he could see. Harry was almost overwhelmed by how helpless he was while looking through Voldemort's eyes. He couldn't do anything, he couldn't close his eyes or fight or get out.

"Thank you, my Lord is generous. I'd like to drop in on a town called Bandon, for a bit, my Lord." The man replied, bowing.

"Visiting Daddy?"

"Yes, my Lord, my Lord remembers well." Arsenius replied.

Not another town, Harry wanted to moan. He didn't want to see any

more fire, or women. Harry tried to close his eyes, and was surprised by the darkness that surrounded him. The sounds and smells of Barnton were gone, replaced by clean air that Harry gasped into his lungs.

"Bandon, they're going to Bandon." Harry tried to scream at that swirling ceiling. It came out as a whisper that rasped into the clean air. Harry tried to yell for help, though it made his lungs scream, but his shout came out no louder than before.

Then he was back in Voldemort's head, too tired to stay awake in his own. Harry wanted to scream and kick and cry to go back to the white room, but he didn't have any body to cry with.

His vision was lurching forward, closer and closer to a small town. Everything was deceptively quiet. The Death Eaters had orders to choose a house and stand by it, quietly. They'd enter at once.

Harry wanted to run and hide when he focused on the masked figures walking in mass around him. They were perfectly silent, and organized beyond anything Harry had seen in the wizarding world. They went and walked through the town, splitting up together and walking down streets around him, and yet seemingly never thinning the crowd of them. There were simply so many dark robes and black masks that the eye lost count. The town streets were black with moving Death Eaters. It was a nightmare choreographed with the loud clicking of dozens of dress shoes on cobblestone streets.

Voldemort followed one of his Death Eaters up to a house this time. Harry didn't know how he'd survive watching such horror from up close. He prayed to wake up before they reached the house's ugly front porch.

The Death Eater rang the doorbell. Harry suddenly wanted to scream, when he heard the cheerful ring inside the home. Ding dong ding dong, diing dong diing dong. It seemed horrendously obscene.

Voldemort and Harry watched the lights flicker on one by one down the house. The Death Eater took off his mask, but Voldemort was behind him, Harry couldn't see anything but the short brown hair on the back of his head.

No!, Let me see the bastard, dammit! Harry fought to move Voldemort's body, to make that one step that would let him memorize Arsenius Jugson's face. He needed to see.

"Thank you for this chance, my Lord." The young man said as he knocked on the door three times.

Harry's vision tipped as Voldemort lightly nodded his head.

The door opened, and the gasp of a muggle brought Voldemort's head back up to focus on a man in front of him.

"Arsenius, what are you doing here?" The muggle man barked, sounding almost exactly like Vernon.

"Not even going to invite me in, Father?" Jugson drawled, before dipping his face down and replacing his mask. Jugson stood back up swiftly, the mask in place, and his whole image was different. He looked taller, proud, and dangerous now. Harry felt a shiver run through his thoughts.

Finished whatever sick act they'd waited for, Voldemort shot his Dark Mark into the air to begin the scene, and Harry felt the Dark Lord's wave of relief as the first screams started. No one would ever think of him as powerless again.

Harry had to watch it all, that time.

The children were left hanging from trees, he learned, and Harry wished he'd never wondered. It made him connected to it, somehow.

The Death Eaters cackled and sent wild spells at each other as they poured out of the village in force hours later. They all apparated away on Voldemort's orders.

The night was hauntingly silent afterward. Harry could hear the wind passing through the streets, but the fires barely crackled as it went by. Even the birds seemed to pass the time in vigil.

The fires were almost dead before Voldemort heard the popping sounds of Order members arriving too late. Harry heard Voldemort chuckle to himself, a proud, humorless sound that followed his thought that no one was even close to able to fight against him. Dumbledore was an old man, and he renewed in a restored body. The Potter boy was useless, just a symbol to be killed so those of little faith would return to him. Voldemort released his laugh again, and prepared himself to apparate.

The white ceiling wasn't spinning the next time Harry woke up.

Arsenius Jugson. Harry tried to speak as he woke, to ensure he'd remember the name. Instead he felt himself puking, and being turned to the side. Throwing up was good too, whatever he could do to get those sights and thoughts out of his head, everything but that name.

He needed to get out of the white room. Harry tried to lift his head, and started to raise it. He needed to leave, but as soon as his head left the pillow he could feel the energy pouring out of him, like water tipping out of the back of his head. He only made it up an inch before his head fell back, and by the time he made it back he didn't have the energy to keep his eyes open anymore.

So back to hell it was.

I can't do this forever, Harry thought as he opened his eyes and saw that he was no longer in the white room. But he would, Harry knew.

He'd continue watching it forever if it meant he could wake up and whisper the information that would help take Voldemort down.

How many raids do they do in a night?

Harry woke up gasping names and crying.

"Fenrir, Nott, Rabastan Lestrangle, Jugson, Jugson that bastard-" Harry started to cough and it felt like his lungs were trying to burst from his chest.

"He's awake." He heard a woman say over his coughing. A whooshing sound roared up and died down somewhere nearby. At first Harry thought the village fires had been restarted, until he realized he was in the white room, and there were no villages here.

He didn't get to stay there for long, and the Dark Lord somehow still wasn't done.

"Not back there, not back there!" Harry pleaded as he woke up again, even as he felt his vocal cords ripping in his throat..

Just let me stay in the white room, Harry thought desperately as a face made its way into his vision.

"You were an idiot to go there in the first place, Mr. Potter, I'm hardly inclined to make you do it again." A voice answered, coming straight out of the face above him.

Harry stared at the place in that face where the voice left, wishing he could understand that phenomena but too tired to think about it. He just wanted to sleep, why shouldn't he sleep? Harry knew he wasn't supposed to, but he couldn't remember any reason why he shouldn't, he was so tired..

"The villages!" Harry croaked as he remembered.

Don't sleep, no, no not back there, don't make me go.

Harry heard his thoughts plead again.

"Drink, Potter." A woman's voice told him. Harry didn't understand what that meant, there was nothing to drink, and he didn't want anything in his mouth after seeing-

Harry started to throw up and felt himself turned on his side in time. He felt a rough cloth enter his mouth and pull the taste out.

"Henti." Harry groaned, still remembering the curly haired little girl, despite the latest town he'd seen destroyed.

"Drink, Potter!" The male voice barked from somewhere above him.

Oh. There was a cold glass cup at his lips.

"It will help keep you here, Mr. Potter." A female voice came from beside him to explain.

Yes, yes, need to stay, not back there, no villages. White room, just stay in the white room.

"One would think after killing your Godfather, you'd put more effort into Occlumency, but I see you have reached a level of idiocy that not even death can influence." The male voice said with a tone like a smirk.

"Henti." Harry stated. He found that string in his mind that connected him to his personal hell, and pulled.

Hello people! So we're here at last, Rock Bottom where I left off to revise. From here, everything's new, which means the updates are going to slow down a bit. I'll write as quickly as possible, but I've got 15 pages of original writing due in a week + 2 papers and a midterm, so that's going to work against us too. So, Harry has crashed, lets try to put him back together and turn him into something new, shall we?

~~HP~~

He watched Lucius torturing a Death Eater who'd tried to steal from the burning muggle homes. The Death Eaters were a proud force, apparently, not common pilfering fools.

Harry woke up to more screaming noise. The ceiling seemed to pulse with it.

"-all the stupid, ill-timed accusations I've heard you make of the boy! He could be dying right now, Severus Tobias Snape, and I don't give a hippogriff's horn what defense your brilliant mind has come up with to explain how that was not the most irresponsible, inconsiderate, immature things you've done!"

A woman was shouting, Harry noted with a light groan.

"I would be the last to call you inexperienced Professor, but I am quickly coming to believe that you are far more immature than you think yourself, not to mention rash, thoughtless, and utterly devoid of moral feelings when it comes to the boy!"

"Potter is-" A male voice started, sounding strikingly calm beside the shrieking.

"Not his father! How many insults must you rain upon that teenager before you're done punishing a dead man? And this time your actions could have killed him, I just spent five hours feeding him potions with a spoon as he choked between his screams to get him

stable and out of Voldemort's mind. Well done, Severus, you're finally even with Sirius and James, they're dead and you're killing Harry. Is life sufficiently fair now, you foolish, prideful brute of a wizard?" The voice snarled.

"Potter is awake, Poppy." Harry heard Snape's voice say, before a dark blur covered up his view of the ceiling.

"Harry?, Can you hear me?" The woman's voice came from the blur above him. Pomfrey, Harry realized.

"I have to go back now." Harry realized, and groaned. The burn of stomach acid rose in his throat as he spoke. Harry suppressed his need to cough, wanting concentrate on his mind and magic. He needed to find that little thread again, there was something terrible behind it that he needed to see. Henti would die otherwise, and she was so cute-.

"Stay with us, Harry. Your weakened magic is allowing you to pass into Voldemort's mind, you are very sick, but we are taking care of you. You have to stay here, fight to stay in this room, okay? Don't sleep, not right now, concentrate. Drink this." Pomfrey's voice ordered.

Harry found the thread and smiled triumphantly. He had to go back, there was information to learn, and those bastards had killed that little, curly-haired girl. He had to bring them down.

~HP~

He'd become accustomed to the sound of burning houses, Harry realized with a sickened shock when he entered Voldemort's mind and was startled by the quiet there. Voldemort was walking down a long, wide hallway that was broken periodically by open windows on one side and closed doors on the other. All Harry could tell from the windows was that it was night out.



Harry spotted few decorations but those that did stand out in the hallway gave off the air of being horrendously expensive. The hallway floor looked to be some type of white marble, though it was almost entirely covered up by the embroidered rug that stretched down the hallway and around a corner Voldemort wasn't looking past.

"Is there anything specific you'd like me to bring up in the meeting, my Lord?" asked Lucius's voice from far behind Voldemort's shoulder.

"I will handle them, Lucius." Voldemort responded coldly.

"Yes, my Lord." Lucius's voice replied with perfect respect.

Voldemort turned through a doorway on the side of the hallway and entered the room, his quiet entrance broken by the sound of Lucius quietly shutting the door behind them.

They'd entered what looked like a muggle conference room, Harry observed, only able to see the size and shape of the large round table inside before his eyes adjusted to see past the bright floating globes of light and recognize the people already seated. The room couldn't seem less muggle after that.

Avery, Nott, Crabbe, Goyle, Arsenius Jugson, Wormtail and Bellatrix. With Lucius Malfoy, the group seemed to complete Voldemort's top circle.

Harry looked around at all of them, imagining yet again bursting through Voldemort's eyes to kill them all. They'd been killing comfortably for far too long. All of the Death Eaters had.

They will fucking fear me. Harry thought savagely, looking at all of their faces as Voldemort crossed the room towards the table's head.

He'd heard all of their names and voices in the last raid. They were all there, and Lucius Malfoy was the only one who hadn't seemed to enjoy the killing.

Lucius had just done it efficiently, with an air of boredom around him, like it were any other tedious job. The rest had whooped and laughed and traded laughs. You're a lucky one, Arsenius. Harry still wasn't sure which of the two types of Death Eaters were worse: the ones who were little more than rapists in a mob, and the ones who weren't.

Voldemort took his seat after Malfoy.

Why is Malfoy not at Voldemort's side? I thought he was always Voldemort's 'chosen' supporter, Harry wondered. This was a political meeting, everything was going to be a political statement. Voldemort was conveniently staring straight at Lucius, watching the blond-haired pureblood ignore the other Death Eaters' smirks from his place between Bellatrix and Arsenius.

He got caught. Harry reminded himself, taking advantage of Voldemort's silence to think. Getting caught ruined almost all of his political power. Except for his money he's almost useless.

But other Death Eaters were commended for their dedication in going to Azkaban. Harry argued with himself, remembering the first Death Eater meeting he saw, when Voldemort was first risen.

Other than for getting caught, the disaster at the Ministry hadn't had anything to do with Malfoy, that plan was the Dark Lord's own. It would be stupid for Voldemort to blame one of his top circle for his own mistake, especially when the Death Eater in question was Lucius Malfoy, supposedly one of the richest and most influential wizards in Europe.

Why would Voldemort weaken his own support?. Harry questioned,

watching Bellatrix flash Lucius a thinly-veiled grin and feeling Voldemort's amusement.

Voldemort was flanked by Nott and Avery, and both of them seemed too involved in the papers in front of them to notice the goings on. Everyone else had noticed though, Harry saw from their pleased faces and hidden glances.

Wormtail was currently curling his fingers up and down in a parody of a wave across the table at the elder Malfoy. Harry felt Voldemort's disgust mirror his own at the somehow grossly effeminate lump of a man, and wished he could be irresponsible enough to pull away from the Dark Lord's emotions while watching the same scene. He couldn't risk the lack of information, but he wanted it horridly.

There's an empty space, Harry noticed suddenly when Voldemort refocused his gaze on the elaborately engraved chair between Nott and Crabbe and felt a burst of pure anger.

"Avery, report." Voldemort ordered, without looking away from the empty place.

"I've run and updated the numbers you've asked me for, my Lord. This month's recruitment has gone well. We've gotten another 200 to take up the mask, though many of the non-combative members are still not assigned to specific departments, which means those departmental figures will remain the same as those I reported on in our last meeting. This latest recruitment brings us to 12,400 declared supporters, which means we are currently representing 17% of the population. Snape has informed me of a current 4,400 wizards fighting against us, including the Ministry's 'Centrally Assigned Aurors' and Dumbledore's 'Order' members. This would mean of the total European Wizarding population of 73,000, the members fighting against us total an intimidating 6 percent, my Lord." Avery reported.

Harry mentally winced as Voldemort's inner circle began to cackle.

Only Malfoy and Voldemort refrained, but even they spared a pleased smile.

"But I wonder, why is Snape not here to give us those estimates?" Voldemort said quietly in a disappointed voice that made Harry's mind writhe with fear.

The empty chair is Snape's? Harry thought with surprise. He hadn't realized Snape was so elite within the Death Eater ranks.

What the hell is Snape doing? Why did he ignore Voldemort's call?

"May I speak, my Lord?" Lucius asked without lifting his head. Voldemort's vision jolted back to the disfavored pureblood.

"On his behalf?" Voldemort asked.

"Yes, my lord." Lucius responded quietly.

"Speak." Voldemort ordered. Lucius looked over finally, though his eyes were kept focused at Voldemort's hands.

"Snape was waylaid by Dumbledore, my Lord. My Draco informed me immediately, Snape was prepared to join us but contacted Draco at the last minute to say that Dumbledore has ordered his presence, at the risk of his loyalty. If he were to have disobeyed, my Lord, he may have lost his standing in Dumbledore's misplaced esteem."

This is too complicated, how am I supposed to know if Snape is loyal or not? Did Dumbledore actually threaten him? Is Lucius lying to protect Snape? Why would he? Is Lucius just wrong and Draco was lying? Why is Lucius protecting Snape at all?

"Defending Snape as ever, Lucius. Much time has passed since the last war, but I remember warning you then, do not let that child of yours make you weak. We have to build an army, and so far your son

and his godfather have hardly even been present in it." Voldemort cut in quietly.

Godfather. That explains that at least.

"We are one, Lucius, you can not split your loyalty and call yourself a loyal man. Treasure your son for his potential as a Death Eater, but remember that he is nothing without that potential. Snape is the same, he is nothing if he is not loyal." Voldemort preached, staring straight at Lucius. Out of the corner of Voldemort's eye Harry saw Bellatrix gazing up at him and nodding like a woman at prayer before an angel.

"Yes, my Lord, thank you, my Lord." Lucius responded, bowing his head back to the table again. His light hair fell over his shoulder and brushed gently against the table edge. Malfoy looked almost as reverent as Bellatrix in the quiet position.

Voldemort swung his vision over back to Avery.

"I was hoping for thirty percent by now, Augustus."

"Yes, my Lord." Avery responded warily. "If my Lord would permit the distribution of propaganda, I could report these numbers to the population and recruitment would certainly-"

"I think not." Voldemort interrupted, sounding almost harsh in comparison to his usual quiet, hissing voice.

"Yes, my Lord." Avery subsided, curling back into his chair away from Voldemort before quite purposefully leaning forward again. Harry felt Voldemort note the disloyal motion.

"Nott." Voldemort ordered, his vision swinging over to the older Death Eater on his other side.

"I've acquired all the materials you've asked me to, my Lord. The wand specifications are written up in this report here," Nott gently pushed a thick stack of parchment towards the center of the desk as he continued. "The wands were all made by masked Death Eaters, double checked against Ministry warding spells by separate D.E task personnel, and are awaiting your order for distribution, my Lord." Nott said in a fast, clipped tone.

"This month's raiding has also gone well, my Lord. The Opposition rarely arrives on time to skirmish with our forces. Our raids in Dorset and Archiestown were the only ones to end this way, and as my Lord predicted, we had the advantage and suffered no casualties. The Opposition's forces are still unable to cast effective temporary anti-apparation wards, so there remains no reason to switch retreat strategies."

Harry focused on all of the information, carefully memorizing it as Nott threw it past him. He was going to be useful the next time he woke in the white room. He tried to hear every breath people released into the room, and everything Voldemort was aware of. Voldemort's hands were cold. All of the Death Eaters were sitting too nervously. Wormtail was rubbing his hands together in a disgusting expression of eagerness. Lucius obviously accepted his massive fault. He sat quietly, and kept his head down. Nott took a breath in to continue his rant of information.

"With your leave, I have appointed Thorfinn Rowle to take care of establishing portkeys at every raid site, for the off-chance that the Opposition pulls their heads out of shit-lined arseholes where they left them and cast reasonable anti-apparation wards. So far Rowle has performed his fool's errand respectably, though to date the Opposition is still staring at their colons." Nott reported. The table again chuckled, though Harry saw Lucius reach for his wine and take a sip instead. Harry could feel that Voldemort's face didn't shift at all, but knew that the Dark Lord was amused by the crude comment.

"At the moment the raids have averaged 45 minutes in total attack time. Snape has informed me that the raiding strategy is working perfectly. His contacts have stated strongly that the majority of the Opposition effort is focusing on protecting the muggle chattle. The Ministry is already understaffed obliivating everything that moves. The Order is apparently still attempting to find a pattern in our attacks, from which they can anticipate the next ones."

That caused a chuckle from around the room, Harry noticed. Even Lucius smiled lightly.

"According to Snape the raiding strategy is highly affecting Opposition moral, both in the Ministry and the Order forces, especially in regard to the displays of children, so that is also going as my Lord predicted. Within our own troops, in regards to moral, the raids have mainly been enjoyed, although there is a concern that the wild nature of the attacks are detrimental to troop organization and -"

"Stop." Voldemort ordered, and the room went silent.

What's going on? Harry thought, and tried to pick out every sight, smell, and sound in the room. All of the Death Eaters were struggling trying to look perfectly loyal. Wormtail seemed to be sucking on his thumb, though the sound of him biting his nails was crackling in the silence. The Death Eaters were apparently too preoccupied with staying perfectly silent and still to sneer at him for the habit as Harry would have expected.

:You've come too far into my head, spy: Voldemort's voice surrounded Harry. He couldn't mistake it for spoken word, the voice was different than Voldemort's usual. It was deeper, and far more human.

Is this what Voldemort sounds like to himself?, Harry wondered briefly before he remember what, exactly, he'd heard Voldemort think.

Shit. Harry thought, and tried desperately to pull back towards the white room, away from his focus on the room around him, but he'd tried that dozens of times before, and it never worked. He didn't know how he got back to the white room, he just did. Getting into Voldemort's head was far, far easier than getting out. He could get away from Voldemort's emotions by not focusing on them, but how was he supposed to get out of his mind entirely? Harry tried to pulled his own thoughts backwards, desperate to feel the control of his own body return to him, even if it came with weakness. He had to get out.

:Ah don't leave so soon, my friend. You've done a feat I daresay few have dared try: Voldemort's thoughts 'said' in a voice that sounded subtly interested, and Harry saw the scene of the meeting room disappear slowly, as if a curtain had been dropped over it from above.

He closed his eyes, Harry realized.

:You're one of Dumbledore's, I suspect. The Ministry would never dare break their precious little laws. And here I thought Dumbledore had become too quaint to ever try something so dangerous and new. Do you think he will regret his success, when you are dead? He used to count casualties, but I'm afraid now he cries in his overstuffed Headmaster's chair over every limp body I leave on the street. You're on the wrong side, Legilimens. Join me, I will raise you high for this achievement of yours. Or do you honestly believe, that Cornelius Regun Fudge and Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore are going to win this war? If you think that, my spy, I have no need of you, fools have no place in war.:

How the fuck do you make a thought turn around?, Harry asked himself frustratedly as he tried it. He'd followed what felt like a string of magic into Voldemort's mind, but he didn't have magic in Voldemort's head, so how was he supposed to use it?



Magic is in the body, Harry remembered belatedly. Of course he couldn't find the magical connection back to his body, his body was the only thing that would be able to feel or use it.

How the hell did I get out of here before? Harry wondered suddenly. He'd been so stupid, how was he supposed to help the Opposition when he couldn't even get back into his own damned brain?

:Do you know your own worth, spy? The Sun Tzu once wrote that 'All warfare is based on deception', Know your enemy and know yourself and in a thousand battles your victory will never be endangered, even the muggles know that. With you on our side, the war would end. You could save lives, master spy, think of it. Think of the wreckage this war is spreading across the land. And you could end it! Dumbledore and the Ministry are not the answer to this war. They are like vultures, picking out the weak of my army. And here they claim they are saving the world. They will never stop their so-called 'war effort', despite my strength. I will take over the European Ministry and the Order will continue their relentless killing. They are little more than terrorists, if anything more at all. This country's suffering will go on endlessly. But with me? I will end this war. I will strengthen the world beneath me, whether you fight against me or not. The difference is, with you the war may end quickly. Are you interested in saving lives, spy of Dumbledore?:

:Pull out of my mind now, if you're interested. Tell your leader everything you've heard here, it's of no matter, he's heard it before. You have twenty four hours to contact me. Manage that, and I'll give you a spot in my top ranks, and perhaps one day you will be seated at this very table you've spied upon. We seem to have an empty chair, after all. Don't tell your leader I knew of your presence. When he asks why you escaped so quickly tell him I'd started torturing a man for no reason, and had mentioned I'd planned on doing it for the next full day. That is your twenty four hours. Do not try this delightful trick of yours again. I will not be so unaware as to not notice you the second time. I assume you still hold some ties of loyalty to the

Opposition. I doubt you will enjoy watching what there is to see through my eyes everytime I feel you looking through them. Surely there are only so many times that Dumbledore needs to hear what happens to his precious freedom fighters when he sends them off to kill. Though perhaps you can be of some good staying with your loyalties and reporting back what you've learned every time you venture here. After all, Dumbledore is yet to get the message.:

The meeting scene flashed back into existence. The shuffling sounds of the Death Eaters stilled immediately as Voldemort turned his opened eyes on them.

Voldemort stood gently and started towards the door.

"Lucius. The rest of you, be in place in twenty four hours." Voldemort ordered as he left.

They were in a home, Harry concluded immediately, as Voldemort turned back down the hall and faced a giant center staircase. Harry tried to memorize everything he could, hoping to come upon some helpful information before he managed to escape. So far, Harry suspected Voldemort was right; he hadn't learned anything that Dumbledore hadn't heard before.

The staircase opened onto a beautiful room that resembled a dance hall with its dark wood floor and huge space, through the staircase still took up most of the floor. There was a giant crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling, lined in tiny balls of light that managed to light up every corner of the room. Voldemort walked down the staircase quickly and past through the double doors pulled fully open against the wall. Inside Harry saw what he guessed was an entrance hall, marked by the engraved white double doors in the center of the opposite wall, flanked by full-length windows running down the entire wall. Voldemort's gaze jerked away from them quickly as the man made his way to the sliding doors Harry hadn't noticed on the side of the room. The doors slid open as Voldemort and Malfoy approached,

revealing a room set with comfortable-looking chairs and card-tables.

"Lucius." Voldemort hissed, and a door on the side of the room lit up. It was startling to open a door straight onto a staircase, but Voldemort didn't seem surprised by it. He started down the staircase immediately, and it lit up with lights as soon as his foot hit the first step.

It was a strangely humanizing moment, Harry thought to himself, to see the Dark Lord focus on the step in front of him to keep himself from falling.

An image of Voldemort tripping down the steps flashed in Harry's mind. He would have grinned outright if he hadn't suspected what exactly Voldemort was going underground to do.

"What is the objective in this, if I may ask, my Lord?" Lucius's voice came from behind as Voldemort reached the plain-looking wooden door that sat at the foot of the stairway.

"I've had a boring day." Voldemort answered. The line, while it could have sounded childish, made Harry want to tear his way back to the white room before he had to see or hear anything more.

Voldemort pulled open the door, releasing a wave of sound that had obviously been magically trapped inside. It didn't take Harry long to recognize the distinctive sounds of a man's screaming.

There weren't any locks on the door, Harry remembered, blinking dumbly in surprise until his mind caught up with him. Wizarding locks didn't leave any trace, he knew that, but it was very different to read that in a textbook and see what looked like a bathroom door open onto a prison.

Wizarding dungeons were different than he'd read about in muggle fiction stories, Harry noted as he passed into a well-lit, carpeted

hallway. It looked like it was taken straight from the second floor of the Leaky Caldron, except for the line of torture instruments that held themselves up along the walls. Harry wanted to shudder. He'd have preferred dragons and cold stone to the almost cheerful atmosphere of the torture here.

Mundungus Fletcher, Harry almost tried to say aloud when he saw the man held up against a wall by some nameless spell. Harry had known from the curses echo-ing from down the hall that the man was wizarding, but he'd never expected to see someone he knew. Dung went silent upon catching Voldemort's eye, and then started to smile.

"Ah yes, good, you're a good sucker to see, you know." Mundungus made out before spitting fiercely on the ground. "I'm a dealer like you, it's all give and take, I get that, and hey, I spent a hell of a lot of time in the Order headquarters, no need for the hurt, I've got information to give, full to bleedin' bursting with it, sure, and I'll throw it to ya, just like I said before, it's all give and take in the world, Voldy my frien-"

Dung didn't get any further than that.

Voldemort was a fool to let his 'spy' see this, Harry thought when Voldemort let Lucius take over. Hearing Mundungus ruined the idea that there was some fundamental difference between wizards and muggles. After all, Harry knew for sure now, they all sounded exactly the same when they screamed.

~~HP~~

Harry woke up and told the air everything he'd learned in the meeting. A woman said "Sleep, Mr. Potter, I'll tell Dumbledore."

He knew Voldemort was right, he hadn't learned anything useful enough to bother worrying about spies. Everything he'd learned, Voldemort already knew, and Dumbledore needed to hear. If Voldemort learned it had been Harry Potter in his head, so be it;

Harry didn't know who to trust in the Hogwarts faculty to get the information to Dumbledore without giving that information away, and Dumbledore was not known for rushing around the castle to talk to him directly.

Harry barely had time to figure that out and speak before he fell asleep.

Harry woke up alone in the white room. He was exhausted and slightly dizzy, but he barely cared once he realized quite how sick he was.

He could barely feel his magic. It was like in the hostel room, when he needed most of his concentration to feel a tiny bit of the force of magic within him without confusing it with his pulse.

He couldn't go back into Voldemort's mind and learn anything useful, and he could barely lift his head from a pillow. His magic felt too weak to even manage lumos. Harry closed his eyes to suppress his panic.

He'd tried to train to become useful and failed.

But it meant that he wasn't wasting time lying alone sick; there was nothing he was supposed to be doing. He couldn't waste time by not preparing for war if he was too far gone to help anything at all..

At this point, Harry told himself firmly, he could only waste other, more useful people's time. Harry listened to the silent, still room and almost smiled with relief; there was no one there helping him.

What about the assurance Moody had offered with his training? By the end of it, he was supposed to either be a worthwhile wizard, or dead. He'd known back then that he didn't want anything else.

But he hadn't made the cut. Honestly Harry figured he couldn't be too surprised. He had never been an asset in the war. The Order had

shown him multiple times that the best he could do was to stay out of the way.

So why hadn't he died?

Harry almost wanted to scream at Moody for never killing him during one of those random psychotic and dangerous moments of paranoia. Months ago it would have been easy for the auror to cast a quick spell when Harry wasn't looking.

It would be easy now, Harry thought bitterly. He could barely move or concentrate enough to feel properly miserable; there was no way he'd be able to take on the mad auror.

Harry'd known he couldn't live with being useless months ago, before he'd heard Avery's numbers or seen the Henti's mother choking on a silencing spell. Back when Sirius's death was the only real motivation he had for tracking down Death Eaters and ripping them apart one by one.

Harry clenched his closed eyes tightly, hoping Madam Pomfrey had figured it out, and had decided to let him die. It was a time of war. That changed the stakes of everything, and made very little room for compassion. Even more so because Madam Pomfrey was on the losing side. Madam Pomfrey knew him pretty well, thanks to all of his stupid heroics; he just had to pray she knew him well enough.

He simply couldn't take making it less likely for the Opposition to succeed.

I'm not going to be able to kill Arsenius Jugson. Harry realized with a jolt and let out a furious grunt deep in his throat.

Damn it. Harry thought succinctly. He needed to kill that man.

"We could lose this war." Harry stated, opening his eyes to the ceiling

above him as he was hit by the thought.

He knew the numbers now. There were 12,400 Death Eaters. Wizarding Europe was both corrupt and not addressing the issue. There were apparently only 4,400 wizards were fighting against the Dark Lord. Including civilians.

Harry remembered the news he'd been catching up on since the beginning of the year. Fudge had declared Voldemort a 'terrorist' and avoided a full declaration of war. The Ministry was in shambles, with people rushing to cover their own asses. Article after article exposed corruption and incompetence, whether real or false, and Ministry personal were being sacked-and replaced-by the dozen. Replaced by Death Eaters, Harry had guessed, Death Eaters or simply political thieves who were trying to pull as much personal gain from the ashes of the European Ministry as they could before the Death Eaters really took it over.

How the hell was the so-called 'Light' expected to survive at all?

It didn't matter if he joined the Order or not, Harry realized. That would only make 4,401 wizards who were drastically outnumbered by the Death Eaters.

And what if we lose?

The Weasleys, Dumbledore, Lupin, McGonagall...were there any adult wizards that he liked that weren't in the Order?

Harry looked down at the thin sheet covering his obviously sickly body, stuck with sweat to his too-thin legs. Draco Malfoy made a better candidate than he did. True, Draco was in training to be evil, but at least he could walk.

He was 16 years old; he'd only been trying to learn magic for half a year. Even Hermione Granger could have made a better candidate

for 'Savior of the Wizarding World' than he did, if Hogwarts had taught her more. He already gone far beyond the knowledge she had, and it wasn't going to be nearly enough to take down 12,000 wizards.

Have we already lost the war? Harry wondered, thinking over Voldemort's improvised speech. Perhaps Voldemort was right, perhaps the 'Opposition' was doing nothing else but prolonging the death toll of the Dark Lord's revolution. Harry stared at the ceiling, wishing the war would just go away. He couldn't stop fighting and let Voldemort kill him and everyone he loved, but how innocents were going to die because of that decision?

Harry didn't know why he remembered that little girl with the curly hair and the My Little Pony out of everyone he saw in the raids, but her image was stuck in his mind and she never stopped appearing before his eyes. She was so cute. He was glad he hadn't had to see her blue and tiny with the rest of the children in the trees.

The raids are just to distract us, Harry remembered. But why is it working so well? Why haven't they been stopped? What is Dumbledore doing with the Order's time?

And damnit why don't I know anything about what's going on?

I can't even say if there's still a chance of winning, Harry acknowledged with a grimace. He was still just as ignorant about the war effort as he'd been back when he was sitting at the Dursleys with Dudley crunching down carrots behind him.

And I'm the so-called 'Savior of the Wizarding World'?

We could lose this war. Harry repeated to himself, almost left dumbfounded at the thought. Why hadn't he ever thought it before?

The Death Eaters could win. What would the wizarding world look like? What would happen to the muggleborns? The Ministry would be



destroyed, not even Hogwarts would stay the same.

Would any of the Order make it out alive? Harry asked himself, like he had a thousand times before. Sirius's death was his fault. How many more would die on account of his incompetence? He had to end this war.

Harry forced his arms to move and pushed himself up to sit against the backboard behind him. His arms wobbled as energy poured from his body. A headache started as soon as he swung his legs over the side of his bed.

I need to get back to work, Harry thought, glancing around the room one more time to double-check that the room was still empty but for the bedside table at his side. None of his books were there, and there was forty seven of them that he'd have to reread.

Seven years of Hogwarts texts, Reliable Locking Charms, 101 Spells for the Modern Wizard, A Charms Compendium Volumes one through ten, Modern Transfiguration Techniques, Styles, and Resources, Protection Spells and How to Cast Them, Volumes one and two, Shades of Gray: Dark Magic for Altruistic Goals, A Treatise of Magical Space Theory, A Dissertation Concerning Magical 3-Dimensional Complete Space, Warding in 3 Dimensional Complete Space, How 3-D C.S Warding Magics Affect Advanced 1st Class Castings in Shared Target Objects, The Specifics of Intra-transfiguration of Target Objects with a Mixed Organic Makeup, Exterior-bordered-complete Charms: Casting without a Target Object, How Deterioration affects Organic Target Objects, Charms against Organic Target Object Deterioration,...

The titles came back to him in a blur. Of course he understood how Organic Deterioration occurred, and he wouldn't need to reread anything about that anyway; he could name ten spells on how to avoid it without even stopping to think.

Harry suspected with any modicum of thought he could figure out a way to transfigure target objects to avoid it.

It would be easy usually, Harry thought, considering the different ramifications a Containment-Charm-based transfiguration could have even as he pushed himself to get his upper body vertical over his legs on the bed.

It all depends on the target object in question. Harry considered, trying to shift his weight forward.

I'm definitely going to fall. Harry decided, seeing the room spin and throb with his headache even as he pushed himself a few inches closer to the ledge. He had to get out of the room, he had to get to Griffindor tower, where he'd left the books he'd ordered from Knockturn alley. He'd already read everything useful in the library, hopefully he'd be ready for the illegal 'tomes' he'd bought. He needed something to learn anyway, and he wasn't ready for the Room of Requirement.

Harry almost gagged at the thought, and felt himself truly throwing up, only just missing his knees. Harry looked down and watched the room circle around the line of saliva connecting his mouth to the floor.

Now I have that to fall in. Harry thought resignedly, looking down again only to see clean white tile beneath him.

Did I hallucinate throwing up?

"Do not try to get up, Mr. Potter. You most certainly can not stand, and the cold tile will do nothing helpful for your fever." A female voice told him.

Harry looked up and saw a blur swimming in the air to the right of him.

"You are ill, Mr. Potter, and you are in an infirmary. You are exactly where you need to be. Lie back down please." The voice ordered, approaching him. Harry felt a warm spot on his shoulder pushing him down, and realized it was connected to the huge figure beside him.

Madam Pomfrey is pushing me down. Harry understood.

"Where are my books?" He asked, trying to sound as healthy as he could. His voice came out rough and deep and he wanted to gag and cough and choke on the words as they itched in the back of his throat.

"Not here. You've made yourself rather impressively ill, Mr. Potter. I'm sure your motives are very commendable. So well done, you've worked very hard, and lie back please." Madam Pomfrey answered him, sounding hurried.

"I need to study." Harry answered her, feeling that itch in the back of his head that told him that he wasn't doing anything and that wasn't right and he needed to start doing something productive now.

"That is a different discussion, Mr. Potter. Let's get your body healthy first, then we can work on your study habits." She answered him.

"Could you please bring me the book Magical Theory on long-term Charms on Evolving Target Objects in Relation to Warding by E. N. Elerding? It's in the library, in the Advanced Research section, second from the left on the fifth shelf to the right of the stone bench and the statue of a lion and a mouse. I put it back but I want to consult on something." Harry asked, closing his eyes and trying to ignore the terrible painful rising swirling feeling in his stomach.

"When you are healthy, Mr. Potter, I'd be delighted to call a house-elf for you. For the moment, no, and do not think of ordering your own house-elf to come here Mr. Potter. You might be dead before the apparation crack." Pomfrey's voice responded from somewhere

above him, though Harry wasn't sure what direction she was talking from at all.

Harry opened his right eye to squint slightly around the room. He found Pomfrey's form again and met her eyes in question.

"At the moment your body is extraordinarily weak, weaker than I've ever seen a wizard's body become in many ways. Long term damage is different than a armful of vanished bones, Mr. Potter. I can not give you a potion and make this better, because you weakened your body slowly enough that your magic weakened alongside it. At the moment, practically-speaking your body reacts like that of a squib." She said.

"You can't take magic from a wizard." Harry answered back, pushing against her hands as she tried again to push him backwards onto the bed.

"No, but you've done the very commendable feat of weakening your magic to an almost unheard-of extent. Potions react to the magic within a wizard, Mr. Potter. Every potion I give you has to be watered down to ten percent of its usual dosage so that it does not simply poison your body like it would do to a muggle, and it is only thanks to Professor's Snape's almost unbelievable genius that I have a potion to treat you with at all. Now lie down." She ordered. Harry felt a hand tip him back, and another grab the back of his head and keep it straight on his neck until he felt a pillow take its place.

Oh god, now I have to sit up again. Harry thought, and allowed a groan to escape him.

"I need my books." Harry repeated.

"Right now you are in an entirely magic-free room. There are wards keeping as much of the magical world's interference out of here as possible. Every potion you've ingested in the last week, and yes,

there have been many-"

"A week?" Harry interrupted.

"You slept for days at a time between passing in and out of Voldemort's mind, Harry. It's November 5th." Pomfrey answered, instantly sounding less clinical.

"Was any of the information I got useful?" Harry asked, opening both eyes as wide as they would go so he could actually see Pomfrey's face, and hopefully read whether she was telling the truth or not.

"I don't know, Mr. Potter, but anything you were able to say would have been days old." She answered.

Useless then.

"Could you bring me a book please?" Harry asked as politely as he could.

"No." Pomfrey answered, her harsh tone restored immediately even as her hands gently pulled a sheet over his body. "You are going to stay in bed, and get weeks of bedrest, and be bored to Knockturn until you are healthy, Mr. Potter, as you should have been in here doing months ago before the incredible lack of insight on all of our parts allowed you to almost die in the middle of the best magical wards in the country." Harry felt a hand push on his chest, feeling strangely gentle beside the cuttingly annoyed voice.

"I need my books." Harry argued back, trying to pull an arm up to push against her. He didn't feel the brush of sheets against his arm, and guessed it wasn't moving.

Harry pulled his head up, groaning at the amount of energy the motion took, only to see an entirely open, empty room, like when he woke up.

"Pomfrey?" Harry asked in his harsh voice.

Was that a fever-dream? Harry wondered, feeling himself sweat into his sheets even as his bones wanted to shake with cold. He was feverish, that much he did know. But had Pomfrey come? Would calling Kretcher kill him? Was she going to bring him his books after all?

"Damn it." Harry rasped.

I did it, I did it, I did it!! Got past major block here, and I'm finally here ready to update for y'all. So So sorry for the huge unannounced hiatus, I hadn't thought it had been so long! My sorry! But we're above 100,000 words now! Woohoobies!! Yay!! Hurray! Hazzah! ....Yeah... in any case, Harry's alive, and hopefully he'll stop being a dumbass and stay that way.

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~~HP~~

Harry woke up to a cold cloth wiping water over his face.

"Good morning, Harry." Pomfrey said from above him.

Harry opened his mouth to speak, but was quickly cut off.

"-And before you ask for your books, let me really explain what's going on right now. You are finally stable. You've been in this infirmary for two weeks, essentially because you were an idiot."

Harry gaped at Pomfrey as she quietly leaned back in the chair beside his bed.

"Let me tell you what your health scans told me when you got here. You were emaciated and suffering from severe malnutrition and sleep-deprivation. Your left hand has been broken so many times that it has developed what is called deep arthritis, something magic can not cure. Your left hand will be weak for the rest of your life. You were covered with scars from various unidentified hexes, most of those I've luckily been able to handle. That tells me that however you were cursed, you did not go to any viable mediwizard for treatment."

She looks pissed, Harry noted to himself. He'd never seen the woman's ire turned against him before.

"You were currently under the mixed influence of polyjuice and Mandrake Drought, and were addicted to the latter. You should be pleased to know your addiction has been taken care of and your liver and kidneys have both been mostly healed, though their recovery process was slowed due to the nature of your magic. As I have explained, your magic is weakened, and though growing, it is still a major factor in all of your potions administrations. If your poor health had been the affect of a single day or week of idiocy, your body would be fully restored now, thank Merlin for wizarding medicine. Instead, because of whatever foolishness lead to what must have been months of continual mixed potions intake, sleep deprivation, and other mentioned idiocies, you will be in this bed for several more weeks."

Madam Pomfrey leaned forward to rest her elbows on her knees and stared into his face.

"I spoke to all of your professors, asking about your recent behavior. Apparently you've been so far ahead in all of your classes that your failing participation was overlooked, but you do not pay attention in class. Whenever called on, you tend to look up from whatever huge research tome you are currently attending, and answer the question, however difficult it may be. That tells me you are studying inside and outside of class, and I'm guessing during the usual sleeping hours as well. You're working literally twenty-four seven, Mr. Potter." She said.

Harry stayed silent, hoping she understood that he wasn't pouting. He simply had nothing to say. He doubted she would believe any lie he could come up with on the spot, and he could see in her expression that she was already set for a lecture. He'd only waste time trying to stop her.

"What will dying in this bed do to help anyone in the war, Mr. Potter?" She asked, her brown eyes still staring straight at his own. "Stop trying to convince me to get your books, stop trying to fight this war from a hospital cot, stop studying and let your body put itself back



together. Otherwise, you are going to die, and there we be precious few men left prophesied to win us this war." Look, I could force you to rest by simply leaving you with nothing to do but sleep and eat and heal." Pomfrey stated, rubbing her hand over her eyes.

"I don't because you need to break the habit of constantly moving, constantly studying, or you'll go back to the behavior that brought you here as soon as you get healthy enough to walk out that door." She stated. "I cannot allow you to leave here so untreated. You are addicted to studying, I expect you use it as an escape from having to think about anything else as you said, but that chain has to be broken before you leave here. Otherwise I'll heal you just enough for you to study and walk only to see you walk away and come back in a box. I hate funerals, Mr. Potter. Take that yellow potion now."

Harry looked over at where Pomfrey was pointing and saw a small rack of potion vials on a nightstand beside his cot. Harry forced his hand up and over, pushing it toward the vials as he watched it shake in the air. Harry clenched his teeth and concentrated on keeping his hand still as he approached the delicate vials. His fingers rammed into the small wooden potions rack and he saw it tilt precariously as he tried to get a grip on the most yellow, vile-looking potion he'd ever seen. Harry finally managed to get a grip on the small glass vial, holding the top of it in the tightest fist he could make. He tried to lift the potion and felt his entire arm start to shake, and heard the potions vials rattling as the entire rack shook with him.

Damn it, Harry cursed to himself as he pulled up on the potion vial and felt his weak hand slip over the glass. He clenched harder and jerked, only noticing that he'd somehow gotten a hold on the entire rack when he saw the vertical frame start to fall over. He pushed his hand back, hoping to catch the rack. He managed to push it back enough that it didn't fall off of the nightstand, instead falling onto his arm and letting all of the potions on it scatter over the tabletop. Harry was fairly sure he heard one vial roll off the nightstand and clink onto the floor, but he was concentrating on holding the yellow potion and

trying to figure out how exactly he was hoping to get the cork off of it.

Harry was panting by the time he got the potion vial up to his mouth. He clamped his teeth down on the cork and pulled back with his hand. The cork pulled out with an almost comical pop. Harry watched the potion inside swish around precariously as his hand shook until he managed to get the cork out of his mouth and the potion vial into it. He grinned around the taste of the bitter, thin liquid that meant he was done moving for awhile. His head was pounding angrily at him and his hand felt like it was about to fall off for weakness and pain, but Harry figured it was worth it.

"You know you could have asked for my help, Mr. Potter." Pomfrey said and Harry could practically hear her pursing her lips.

"Right. And prove your point so easily?" Harry replied, still grinning, glad now that he'd never thought of asking her to open the vial for him. Harry heard her laugh and looked over to see her standing up and shaking her head in exasperation.

"Think about my point, Mr. Potter." She ordered. "It's a simple one. You've almost died, you're too weak to help yourself and you've done this to yourself. You need to learn to let me help you."

Pomfrey slowly picked up the potion rack and righted it on his nightstand before making her way from the room.

Harry was grateful she'd left him alone to think. Pomfrey made sense, he thought, and Harry guessed that were the situation less dire he would have listened to her. But she didn't realize that he couldn't just stop studying, lay down, and rest while men and mothers and children died. It would be an unspeakable evil, to just lay there. He had to keep studying, he had to keep moving, and Harry felt every bone in his body pushing to do so. He couldn't just not try, which meant he had to leave.

Harry got all the way to standing, and past the point of no return leaning away from his bed when his knees gave out. They unlocked, and folded, and Harry had time to notice that the floor heading towards his face looked like stone before he crunched against it.

Harry groaned and rolled his head onto its side, panting with the effort.

"Oh ow. Definitely stone." Harry said. Blood flooded his mouth and he managed to lift himself up to spit away from where his head lay, but he saw blood in the hair draped across the floor anyway.

Long hair, no polyjuice. Right. Harry thought, gazing confusedly at the dark strands that were starting to stick together with the blood.

Harry closed his eyes and concentrated on his pain, doing a quick inspection down his body.

No limbs broken, just bruises. He concluded, knowing the aching pain wasn't nearly bad enough for that.

Broken nose? Harry guessed, feeling and tasting the blood flowing wetly over his face. He felt that crinkly, spongy kind of pain that heralded a broken nose.

Pomfrey's gunna be pissed. He thought next, just as he heard the footsteps heralding her entrance.

To his surprise, she entered without a word. She helped him turn over on his back and started to mop the blood off of his face in silence. Harry searched her face curiously as she worked on him, only then noticing that she'd brought rags and bags of ice with her.

"You saw this coming." Harry said, staring at the ceiling and trying not to blush. It was an odd, he noted quietly, to feel something so normal and healthy as a blush clawing up his cheeks. He doubted Voldemort

had felt anything like that in decades; that seemed scary somehow, though Harry wasn't sure why.

"You haven't changed at all since you literally landed here, I can't expect your actions to be any different than those which brought you falling onto my floor the first time." Pomfrey said.

I'm an idiot, Harry acknowledged silently. Of course I wasn't strong enough to just walk out of here, and where would I go? She'd already told me how sick I am, hell I can feel how sick I am. Still, if she saw this coming why didn't she tie me down?

"So your plan was to let me slam myself into stone until I learned to listen to you? I'm not going to stop studying, Madam Pomfrey." Harry said. He tried to roll over to his side but and felt how unnaturally heavy it was. Harry pulled his head up and glanced over himself, checking his entire body for straps holding him down before he remembered that he wouldn't be able to see the magic holding him down.

Why can't I feel this room? Why can't I feel my magic?

"What happened to my magic?" Harry asked as he glanced around the room, unable to feel even the Hogwarts' warding spells that he was sure permeated every wall around him.

"Your magic is weakened, Mr. Potter. I explained everything yesterday, but if you've forgotten my rant I'd be glad to give another." Pomfrey answered immediately.

Weakened magic. Right. She said that. Harry remembered. How did I forget that?

"Will my memory come back?" Harry asked.

"Assuming you stop throwing your head onto stone floors, yes."

Pomfrey answered, picking up his head carefully and running her wand through his hair.

"I can't stop studying, Madam Pomfrey." Harry said, feeling strange trying to talk with Pomfrey's hand holding his scalp.

"From what I can see, you are addicted to it, Mr. Potter. You can't stop studying and working because you blame yourself for Sirius Black's death and the tentacle scars on Mr. Weasley's arms, and because you've been doing nothing but studying for months now. You're used to that, and your studying has gone so far as to mean you are mentally addicted to it. This addiction almost killed you Mr. Potter, and I am not sure I am qualified to heal you of it." Pomfrey replied.

"Ron scarred from that?" Harry asked before shaking his head and feeling Pomfrey's hands tighten against his scalp to hold him still. "Sirius's death and those scars are my fault, but they aren't why I need to study now. I mean they are but-" Harry struggled to find words, and tried to shake his head again to clear his thoughts.

He wished he hadn't started talking at all yet; that studdering had made him sound like a confused child and he was finished being young and stupid and confused. He'd decided to stop that months before, he remembered trying to start that in the Dursleys and while he was holed up in London. He wasn't friendly and cute Harry Potter anymore, he had nothing to do with that attitude anymore. It made him want to sneer thinking about himself back then, when he demanded respect without even trying to earn it.

Harry stilled his body and thought, trying to find words to express that pull he felt to keep moving, keep studying, to become the most dangerous man he could. He had a feeling he was going to want Pomfrey's respect, which meant he'd somehow have to convince her that he wasn't some complaining little boy who didn't want to stay in bed and rest, or some desperate addict fighting for the next hit. He

actually had to study, supposedly the whole damn war depended on him figuring out a way to kill Voldemort, and it was his responsibility to have that happen as quickly as possible. He was far too aware what kind of suffering was going on in the meantime.

"Let me lay in bed with a book, Madam Pomfrey." Harry ordered and watched Pomfrey roll her eyes above him. He wanted to scream at the gesture.

"No." Pomfrey replied, shaking her head resolutely.

"I need to study, or I have nothing else to think about than-" Harry cut his own sentence off. He wanted to manipulate Pomfrey, and he suspected it would work to a point, but he couldn't sell out those memories to do it. He couldn't make it out to mean any more or less to him than it did.

But aren't I supposed to sacrifice anything? A determined part of Harry's mind insisted.

Even that? Harry thought, feeling sicker at the idea.

I have to live through those deaths and smells and sounds and then dishonor them? What am I supposed to do, start crying about the smells and sounds and screams until Pomfrey pities me enough to hand me a book? When I'm not even the right person to pity?

"Only a matter of days ago you were too physically ill to keep your mind out of the Dark Lord's, Mr. Potter. That should be terrifying."

"This war is terrifying, it didn't become any more or less so just because I was forced to see it too." Harry answered, shaking his head and realizing immediately why Pomfrey had been stopping him from doing so before. Now his headache really hurt.

"The war is beside the point, Mr. Potter. Your health right now is terrifying. You still can't even stand, despite my best efforts. I've explained it to you twice, what more can I say? Your studying schedule almost killed you, and will do so if you go back to it." She said.

"Then I'll study differently. I know I'm sick, and I'll be careful, but the war will never be beside the point." Harry answered, watching the streaks of red light flitter behind his eyelids until he had to flash them open and force himself to stop thinking about which spells the false lights had reminded him of.

"Studying is an escape from these memories for you, Mr. Potter, and unfortunately its an escape for your mind that your body is too weak for. The schedule you were barely surviving on before will kill you within two days." She refused. "You need to face those memories, Mr. Potter. Studying to escape them is what brought you here."

Thank god, Harry thought, realizing that the manipulation wouldn't work.

Just the truth then, Harry decided. The flat out truth, as well as I can say it. Harry thought, laying back and thinking.

"This is about the Death Eaters now." Harry said, meeting Pomfrey's eyes and glaring all of his determination into them. "I need to study to learn to kill them for their own guilt and to stop their crimes and I can't stop for a month because it's healthier. I can die an early death if my body needs it, whatever, as long as they are dead first." Harry said.

The words didn't sound powerful enough, they sounded flat and didn't quite fit with that rage he could feel just beyond his exhaustion. He wanted to rip something apart, and he didn't think he would regret that someday like he regretted most of his past tantrums.

I'm going to really kill someday, Harry thought, and for the first time in

his life his anger scared him, because he was starting to think that 'someday' wasn't far off anymore, and he was starting to think he didn't mind. More than that, Harry thought he might even enjoy it. He wasn't going to have a temper tantrum, he wasn't going to scream at his friends and throw things into walls and suddenly storm off and kill Voldemort and then cry and have it over. It wasn't going to be like Quirrell either, when he was young and scared and didn't really understand what was going on until he was waking up in a hospital and for some reason no one mentioned Quirrell anymore. This time he was going to hunt a man down, and kill him, and then go after Voldemort, because before anything, Arsenius Jugson had to die, and Harry could feel himself hoping that no one got there first.

Harry forced himself back into the present, only then realizing that he'd zoned out thinking. He wondered how long he'd been silent, and gathered his thoughts again. He'd had a good point to make.

"You don't see the things I've seen and walk away from it unchanged." Harry said, closing his eyes so he could focus on looking at the lights that burst beneath this eyelids and carefully not think too deeply into the words he was saying.

"I've done pretty well at walking away trauma-free in my life. Hell I killed Quirrell at eleven years old, didn't I? I held onto his face and let it burn and a couple days later was giddy to find chocolate-frogs on my bedside table." Harry remembered, still astounded that he could've done that.

Perhaps Dumbledore had cast a calming spell on me. Harry considered, before throwing the thought aside as beside the point.

"The next year yet again everyone ignored my warnings, a teacher tried to obliviate me, I saw Riddle looking perfectly human, like me almost, almost killing Ginny. I battled a damn Basilisk, and then found out that my Professor was not only an idiot, he was a serial identity thief. Third year I had two more professors turn their wands on me, a



werewolf try to kill me, I found out my parents had been betrayed and a man falsely imprisoned, and I had to fight off over a hundred creatures which were trying to suck me into my worst memories, of which I had plenty at that point."

Hell this is a long list, Harry realized as he named event after event and forced his body to talk too much. His voice was becoming sandy and difficult to push from his lungs, but he was still two years of trauma away from making his point.

"Fourth year and I'm partially responsible for a friend's death. He was murdered in front of me, then I was tied down and forced to help bring Voldemort back, and then tortured and played with by the fucking madman until I barely escape with my life, yet again."

God it's almost funny how bad Dumbledore was at keeping me safe.

"Fifth year I watch-" Harry felt his throat start to close and changed his words; he wasn't going to try and describe who Sirius was for him. "I watched Sirius die, and it was mostly my fault. I escape with my life, and my friends do too, though apparently Ron didn't escape as unscathed as I'd thought. I suppose someday I should tell him that I know about the scars." Harry wished he had his books already. He wanted to start studying and never bloody stop. "Damn it". Harry said aloud, before realizing he was forgetting his point again.

"And now I just watched families getting tortured and killed, followed by a man I knew. And you expect me to sit and rest, when every day means more people are going to see the shit I've seen, die in those fucking raids."

Here Harry opened his eyes again, and caught Pomfrey's much more respectful gaze.

"All I've done these last months, was do as damn much as I could do, everything I could think of, that might mean I didn't have to be the

partial cause another friend's death. Now I learn that the war is costing so much more than that. It's just about protecting my friends' anymore, and I know perfectly well that I'm not the only one fighting this war. There are 4,400 wizards fighting with me, but all of us have to do everything we bleedin' can to fight. I can't just stop. Two weeks of rest is not acceptable even if it only means the war will stretch on 14 more days. One day is not fucking acceptable." Harry said, and quickly considered and accepted a new angle to play. "If you try to keep me here against my will, and without my books is against my will, I will call Dumbledore, resign from this school and withdraw every other means of consent until you legally may not treat me." Harry threatened honestly, hoping that wizarding law granted him the power to do that. From the way Pomfrey's eyes widened, Harry guessed that it did.

Hopefully Pomfrey would rather give me my books than watch me die, Harry thought.

"I can not make your body strong enough to study just because you will it, Mr. Potter." Pomfrey answered, though when Harry looked at her he could tell that she wasn't just berating him with her point again. "Your health should have been a large part of your fight against the Dark Lord, Mr. Potter, and it certainly has to be now. Throw your need to fight into getting better." She said. "I am a medi-witch that doesn't ask questions and doesn't ship you off to You-Know-Who at first opportunity. You can go to St. Mungos if you'd like, but I suggest you stick with me."

"Let me lay in bed with a book, Madam Pomfrey." Harry ordered. "I'll be careful, I'll only study as much as you think my body can take." He promised.

"You'll have to obey me in more ways than just the book, Mr. Potter." She warned.

"I do have to get better, I know that." Harry said, hating that he had to

concede anything in the discussion but knowing he wasn't convincing anyone that he didn't need her help.

"You need to keep fighting this war, and I believe I'm starting to truly respect that, but two weeks of rest now might save you a year's worth of life later. Forcing your mind and body to work and concentrate at the moment could do some serious damage." She said, looking down and meeting his eyes more fully.

"But that would be after the war." Harry confirmed, and saw Pomfrey sigh.

"Alright, a study schedule. Twenty minutes a day." Pomfrey conceded.

"An hour." Harry bartered, doing his best to hide that he doubted she would negotiate with him at all.

"Half an hour." She said, and Harry had to fight back a triumphant smile. He was going to get his books.

"Forty five minutes."

"Half an hour."

Harr sighed. "Forty minutes." He said.

"Half an hour." Pomfrey repeated.

"You said you respect my need to study." Harry argued.

"I lied. Sod your need to study, you're getting healthy. Half an hour." Pomfrey replied.

"Until I get stronger." Harry accepted, setting his mind that he was going to do everything in his power to get healthy as quickly as

possible.

"Good." Pomfrey said.

"What can I do when I'm not studying? Work my muscles? Try not to atrophy?" Harry asked.

"Sleep." Pomfrey ordered as she got back on her feet and turned to leave the room. It was only when Harry saw how high she was that he remembered that he was still on the floor.

"The rest is either done through careful forms of magic, or done while you are sleeping." She said.

"You're not going to help me onto that bed until I ask for your help, are you?" Harry said.

"When you tried so hard to get there?" Pomfrey replied, pursing her lips and looking perfectly serious except for the laughter lines blooming beside her eyes.

"Damn it." Harry said with a smile.

"It's your own damn fault, Mr. Potter. You should have realized that if you were too weak to grab a potion from a rack you were far too weak to walk."

"Yeah." Harry sighed. "You win again. Would you please help me back to the bed?" He asked, trying his best not to blush. It was so odd, feeling a blush working its way up his cheeks when moments before he'd been thinking seriously about killing a man.

"You'll wake up there, Mr. Potter. I'll go get your books." Pomfrey promised, and left.

~~HP~~

Harry woke up able to see the entire room at once. He glanced around and found himself propped up with pillows, sitting on the cot. Pomfrey was in a wood-backed chair in the corner beside the door, reading the first pages of a thin book Harry recognized.

"Do you know I don't understand a word of this?" Pomfrey said, glancing up at him briefly before lifting the book from her lap slightly to show what she was referring to.

"This treatise will argue the case that life to benign transfigurations lead to full body structural deterioration not only due to Excess Standing Magic but also in proportion to the effects of I.M.G. Energy retained from the original target life." She read aloud before looking at him with her eyebrows drawn up toward her hairline.

"I've been looking forward to reading that one for awhile." Harry said pointedly, reaching for it from his cot.

"What is G.M.I?" Pomfrey asked, walking over and handing it to him.

"It's just an abbreviation for Intrinsic Magical Generation. It was first theorized by a French witch so.." Harry started to answer as he took the book, trailing off when he saw the Pomfrey still looked lost.

"It's the ability to create magic, or stay alive essentially. You know, the difference between a live plant or animal and a dead one. A dead plant could be given enough water and sunlight and whatever but it won't start growing, a live plant will. Whatever that mysterious difference is, whatever life really is, I suppose, that's what's labeled 'intrinsic magical generation'" Harry looked down at the book, remembering what the introduction had outlined.

"Muggle animals only make just enough magic to live, but magical creatures can make more, enough magic to go beyond just living and start having the energy to manipulate in order to fly or stay invisible

or whatever it is that they do. This book argues that the problem with L to B transfigurations is that the final benign object retains the target object's IMG. I'm guessing that'll be used to explain why choosing magical life target objects is always a phenomenally bad idea. This is just going to argue that its a worse phenomenally bad idea than we already say it is." Harry answered, smiling in memory at some of the anecdotes he'd read about, like the idiot wizard who managed to transfigure a couch so badly that it melted all over his floor and started to bubble and float.

"Alright. Half an hour then." Pomfrey answered, patting his covers once before turning and returning to her seat.

"You're staying?" Harry asked as he opened to the book's introduction to reread it. He'd read it the one time when he was trying to organize all of his books by difficulty level.

"Of course. You're my patient." Pomfrey answered, just as a rattling at the door stole both of their attentions to where Ginny came bursting into the room.

"Pomfrey, emergency, maybe confidential?" Ginny said, gasping and hanging onto the doorframe with one hand as she leaned into the room.

"Or maybe I'm leaving. Ginny, let Mr. Potter read but after a half an hour or if he starts looking any more dead than he already does, take the book away. Don't cast unnecessary magic, and you may tell him everything you know, no confidentiality." Pomfrey ordered as she stood up and headed toward the door at a fast walk.

"Yes, Ma'am." Ginny answered obediently, standing aside to let the older woman hurry past before she closed the infirmary door behind her.

"Hey asshole." She said, her posture immediately closing. She

crossed her arms and leaned back against the door. "Blimey, you look like a zombie." She said.

"Unsurprising." Harry said, thinking over Pomfrey's list of his symptoms.

"You're an idiot." Ginny said.

"Unsurprising." Harry repeated with a slow nod. Ginny grinned.

"The emergency?" Harry asked.

"I'll tell you, but first I'm supposed to yell at you, wait." Ginny said, her grin disappearing as she pushed herself off the wall with one shoulder. She walked in front of his cot and planted her feet in a soldier's stance.

"Okay. She said, quickly flipping hair out of her face before focusing a glare at him.

"WHAT THE HELL HARRY?!" She suddenly yelled, her entire face looking furious with no warning. Harry had to keep himself from jerking back in surprise. "You scare the CRAP out of Ron and Hermione, lie to all of your friends, completely ignore us like a prat for months, and almost kill yourself? You look like you got trapped in a Gringott's vault for months, died, came back as a zombie, only to half die again from a bleedin' failing liver and damaged kidneys. Your skin is YELLOW, did you NOTICE THAT YET? You FORGOT about Ron's first Quidditch game, seriously? You DIDN'T GO? DIDN'T EVEN ASK ABOUT IT, YOU STUPID, INCONSIDERATE, PRAT! And Merlin's balls did Ron ROCK and you missed it? Because you were too busy? BUSY, HARRY? How BUSY do you think they were when they helped you research whatever the fuck every year to save the sorcerer's stone, to save me, to save Sirius? Hippogriff's shit, you were busy, Harry, you don't miss that game, you complete ARSE!" She finished, panting again. As suddenly as her rant started it was

finished. Ginny smoothed her shirt out with her hands and pretended to clap dirt from her hands.

"And what do you really think?" Harry asked, silently reminding himself to never truly piss her off.

"You're an idiot for almost dying, but Quidditch can wait while you're trying to stop Voldemort when not even Dumbledore knows how to do that, and friends can wait while you try to deal with the shit that happened last year." She answered.

"Let me study more than half an hour." Harry ordered, looking into her eyes seriously.

"Don't make me come over there and smack you, dumbass. You're half dead, stop pulling yourself the rest of the way. I'm certainly not going to help you." Ginny replied, plopping herself down in Pomfrey's chair and raising an eyebrow at him.

"Yeah, nevermind. I'm an idiot." Harry replied, rubbing his eyes with his right hand and feeling it shake.

I already decided to obey Pomfrey, she made sense. What the hell was I trying? Harry asked himself angrily before dismissing the thought for a more urgent one.

"And the emergency?" Harry asked, glancing meaningfully at the door.

Ginny seemed to sink down into her chair at the reminder. She leaned forward slowly, and braced her arms on her knees as she met his eyes again.

"It was bad, Harry. Professor Snape's a real spy, you know? He lives as a Death Eater, and I'd bet everything I own that he just got tortured as one." She answered, slowly letting her eyes drop down to



the floor.

"What for?" Harry asked quietly.

"Madam Pomfrey told me, strangely enough. I think it's cause she wants you to hear this, though I'd really prefer you didn't. You've been skipping Potions classes lately, yes?" Ginny asked, flashing her gaze back up to him for a second.

"Yeah." Harry prompted.

"According to Pomfrey, You-Know-Who wanted Snape to maintain constant contact with you, and Snape lost that. This is the second time I've seen it, last Friday too. He came in through the floo, wrapped up in his robes and walking straight as always, but even he couldn't hide it. He was shaking terribly, his jaw was clenched, he was sweating like hell, like he was falling apart and it was only his will that was keeping him in one piece at all. I think think happens a lot on Fridays, and Pomfrey tries to put him back together for Monday classes. Everyone knows something's going on. The Monday morning class for Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw third years is canceled so often that one of my friends says she sometimes just doesn't bother waking up for it." Ginny recounted.

"Holy shit." Harry said, carefully making sure to hide any sign of his dislike of the man.

Ginny nodded, and let silence fall, but Harry wasn't willing to let the subject just die and start on his new book. It would be disrespectful, and it sounded like Snape had earned more than that at least.

"I kind of wonder what Snape is really like, you know?" Ginny said, rubbing her hands over her face.

"Whether he's loyal to us or not?" Harry asked, considering the same thing.

"No!" Ginny said harshly, shaking her head back and forth so quickly her braided hair smacked against her jaw. "He's loyal, I know from just looking at him coming back in here. I mean, I guess I could be wrong, luckily nothing really hinges on my opinion of the man but-" Ginny shook her head again, obviously clearing her thoughts from the tangent. "Either way, Snape is always playing a role. He is the constant Death Eater. He hates you, hates teaching, and is just the Great Git of the Dungeons, twenty-four seven. Whether or not he's actually a Death Eater, he's being very careful to look it because Dumbledore will trust him regardless, right? So then, who is he actually?" She asked.

"Other than a brilliant actor." Harry said bitterly, remembering Snape's constant jibes and attempts to humiliate him.

"Exactly." She replied.

"I guess it doesn't matter. As long as he keeps acting we'll never see it." Harry replied, wanting the conversation to be over. He had far too good of an idea what Snape had to be doing with his nights as a Death Eater, and if Snape weren't evil? If Snape were a good man, not only trapped watching the raids like him but trapped performing in them?

Harry felt his stomach churn and tried to focus on something else. He started trying to name the fifteen different types of silencing spells he knew, but he got to the end of the list too quickly, and had to start trying to figure out different transfiguration or charm techniques that he could mix into the set spells.

"It does matter, Harry, 'cause if Snape is a good person here, I'd like to know what's giving him the strength to get tortured every week. It would probably be a smart plan to support him in that as much as possible, no? I'm not in the Order but I'm not stupid, we need Snape, and there's no way Snape's going to last doing this forever." Ginny

interrupted his thoughts quietly.

Harry stared at her, processing her words and the fact that she'd just said them.

"When did you grow up so much?" He'd asked before he could think to stop it. Ginny's face twisted in annoyance.

"Sorry, that sounded bad." Harry apologized before she mentioned how condescending he'd how sounded. "It's just that sounded really bloody mature, and I hadn't thought about it at all." Harry tried to explain, noting that he had to pay attention to people more.

"No worries." Ginny shrugged it off.

Harry let the silence be. For once he actively wanted to think about Snape. The man was being tortured because a 16 year old had starting skipping Potions class? Seriously?

"Do you think Snape would agree to teaching me Remedial Potions?" Harry asked, glancing over at Ginny before returning his eyes to the ceiling.

"It might be better than coming in like that every Friday, sure."

"Do me a favor then?" Harry asked, turning his eyes fully on the fifth-year. "After Dumbledore comes down here, start spreading word that he implied he was disappointed that I knew nothing of potions?" Harry asked, turning his head to face Ginny.

"Sure." Ginny answered with a nod. Harry nodded his thanks back to her and pulled his book closer to himself, deciding quickly to skip the introduction since he'd spent so much time talking, and flipped to the first chapter.

"I'm sorry, I've gotta read." Harry said suddenly, looking up at her

though he knew it didn't matter whether or not she gave him permission, but figuring after that huge explosion, he could at least try not to be an arse about it.

"I know." She said, just nodding.

Harry woke up with his face staring down at his open book.

Damn it.

"When did I fall asleep?" He asked, looking up to see Ginny still across the room.

"About ten minutes after you started reading, aka about seven hours ago. Pomfrey said you should take these."

Ginny held up three potion vials squeezed between the fingers of her hand. She got up and handed him one, its cork already off.

"Damn it." Harry said calmly. He reached to take the potion from her and watched his hand shake the entire way. He clamped his lips around the glass vial to steady it as he drank, and noticed as he reached to hand the empty vial back to her that he felt close to exhausted and wanted to go back to sleep.

"What are these?" He asked as he took the next.

"A nutrition potion, some type of healing potion, and I have no idea." Ginny said as she gave him the last.

"Right." Harry said, considering the murky yellow potion. He drank it.

Harry handed Ginny back the vial, then glanced at his book, lifting his eyebrows apologetically.

"No worries." She said as she returned to her chair and let him sink back into the last paragraph he remembered reading.

Harry could feel his eyes start to strain as soon as he starting reading.

No damn it.

Harry fought his eyes open when they started to droop and pulled his book closer to him. He'd slept for seven hours straight, more than he'd intentionally slept at one time in more than six months. Now he was going to study.

~~HP~~

Harry woke up to the sound of women's voices, staring at his empty lap.

"-shelf across from the sink with anti-itch and burn balms that would be a great help." Pomfrey was saying.

Madam Pomfrey and Ginny were standing near the door of the closed infirmary room, facing each other and obviously expecting him to still be asleep.

"How long did I study?" Harry asked, wishing he had the energy to slam his head into the wall beside the cot. Perhaps bruises would help him stay awake, he thought. They'd worked before and he needed something.

"Last night you mean? Eight minutes I think? Maybe somewhat closer to twelve." Ginny said, turning toward him.

"Lovely." Harry growled, glaring at his shaking hand as he rubbed his face.

"You need the sleep, Mr. Potter." Pomfrey said.

"Right." Harry answered, trying and failing to keep his tone from sounding rudely sarcastic.

"You're yellow, Mr. Potter." Pomfrey said. Harry heard Ginny snort and glared at her. She glanced around the ceiling 'innocently' before

grinning.

Harry looked around the room for his book and saw it in Pomfrey's hand.

"Well, I've gotta go stock shelves. Do enjoy your beauty sleep." Ginny said, saluting Harry as she slipped out of the room.

"We finally escape the Weasley twins and their heir takes the throne." Pomfrey said, shaking her head slightly at the closed door.

"Why is only Ginny allowed to visit me?" Harry asked, only then realizing that Ron and Hermione had not yet descended on him.

"Because out of all the students clamoring to be at your side, keeping you awake and stressed, she was the only one smart enough to instead ask for the right to help care for you. I told her that would mean minding the infirmary while I did my job in here, and she agreed to it anyway. She's not a selfish one, that Weasley." Pomfrey answered.

Harry wished he had time to process that, but he knew he'd already spent too much time talking.

"My book?" He requested, pulling a hand from under the covers to reach for it. Pomfrey placed the book on his lap, but shook her head.

"Talk to me first." She ordered.

I agreed to obey, Harry reminded himself. Pomfrey was a celebrated medi-witch, Hermione had told him. She knew what she was doing to make him healthy, and he needed that.

"What about?" Harry asked.

"How's the book coming?"

"Badly-written and convoluted, and I doubt its point has any merit at all." Harry answered.

"Then why are you reading it?" She asked. Harry clenched his teeth to keep from snapping at her to leave him alone with his studying, and focused on replying.

"Because if the author is right, he's revolutionized the way we should look at transfigurations. Now I highly doubt that he has any solid evidence to back up his claim, but I'm running out of books in the library that say anything I don't already know, so I might as well give this wizard Mr. Hew the benefit of the doubt. That is if I can get through even the first chapter of it." Harry growled.

"How can you possibly have already gone through the entire Hogwarts library?" She asked.

Harry rolled his head back onto his pillow, trying to ease his frustration.

"I haven't, it's just that once you understand magic, a lot of what is taught in textbooks is just a given. For example, once I feel a single transfigured shielding spell, I understand how transfiguration techniques are used to change the nature of the target objects involved into stronger spell foundations, so I don't need to read the seventeen books describing how transfiguration techniques are mixed into different classes of charms, spells, hexes, or long-standing curses." He said.

"But the spells are individual. How does learning the wandmotions and incantations for one charm help you cast a completely different wand-motion for a completely different spell?" She asked

"I don't use wandmotions or incantations anymore. I just concentrate on the feeling of the magic, and making my magic feel the same, and



I found out that it's surprising how similar spells can feel. A String's Strangle spell feels almost exactly like a basic wood-based transfigured warding charm, despite the fact that it's a curse, because they are both based in the same kind of transfiguration. The String's Strangle is actually specifically designed for that, so that amateurs with magical detection will miss it."

Harry said.

"Magical detection? Is that what you're referring to when you say you 'feel' a spell?" Pomfrey asked.

"Yeah. The idea is to use a wizard's intrinsic magic and feel how it reacts to external magical influences. Exactly like a normal 'detecto' spell, but without casting anything, though for some reason Anderling never puts it that simply." Harry said, remembering the book with a mental shudder. It shouldn't have taken him months to understand the skill the wizard was "teaching".

"You feel magic without casting anything, Mr. Potter?" Pomfrey asked, her eyes widening slightly.

"Yes."

Harry watched as Pomfrey took a deep breath and sighed it out, looking fully like she was accepting something she didn't want to.

"Tell me as soon as you feel your magic, Mr. Potter. That'll be the day you can leave." She said.

"You want me to stay longer than that, I gather?" Harry guessed.

"Your addiction, this obsession with being the best you can possibly be, one hundred percent of the time, is not broken Mr. Potter. Among other things, I fear that as soon as you get bored obeying my suggestions about your health you will begin to ignore me entirely,

and then you will die." Pomfrey answered.

"Being strong is being healthy, Madam Pomfrey. I'll obey your orders." Harry promised, even as he openly winced at the thought.

"Yes of course, everyone does." Pomfrey said, patting his bedcovers and not sounding sarcastic at all. Harry grinned at her and nodded.

"Alright, better done than said, I know." Harry replied, before lying back in his bed and letting his hand fall away from the book in front of him. "You want me to rest for an hour before studying, I'll do it." Harry promised.

I need to get better, Harry reminded himself sharply as doubt and the call to study came roaring up.

Pomfrey looked pleased, and nodded.

"Do that, Mr. Potter, and I'll let two friends in to visit you after your studying." Pomfrey offered.

"Thank you, but will their visit slow my healing?" Harry asked.

"It's possible, I'm afraid, but at this point your body can handle it safely."

"Then no, thank you." Harry replied, watching Pomfrey's eyebrows rise.

"I've created a monster haven't I, Mr. Potter? You will now be as obsessive about maintaining your health as you were obsessive about ignoring it." Pomfrey asked.

"If it is necessary." Harry replied.

And I judge it necessary. He added silently.

"You'll take the visit from your friends. Medical order." Pomfrey said with a hard voice.

Damn.

Harry nodded to himself, reminding himself that her orders were set in stone for him.

"Okay." Harry said aloud.

"Good. Rest, I'll wake you up and bring you some food in a few hours." Pomfrey replied in a softer tone, picking the book up from his lap.

"Thank you." Harry said, rolling his eyes up to stare at the ceiling, already trying to figure out how he was going to manage being awake and without work for an hour without thinking about the raids and not wanting to think about what Hermione was going to say when she was let in to rant. Harry hoped Pomfrey was right that rest and friends would be good for him. He couldn't figure how they would be.

~HP~

Harry woke to the smell of chicken, and found Pomfrey placing a bowl of soup and a crust of bread on his lap.

"Awesome. Thank you" He said and dug into it immediately. He'd woken up hungry, for the first time in weeks.

"Ms. Granger and Mr. Weasley will most likely be here soon. I told them they have an hour or until you appear to fall asleep." Pomfrey said.

'Appear' to fall asleep, she's giving me a way out.

"Thank you." Harry said, trying to force meaning into his voice to imply what he was thanking her for.

"You're welcome, Mr. Potter." Pomfrey said neutrally, before leaving him alone.

Harry forced himself to eat, though his hunger had disappeared almost instantly. Ron and Hermione were going to be loud, and angry, or loud and angry, or quiet and understanding, and he didn't want to face it looking like hell on a hospital bed when they couldn't understand why that was anything but stupid.

He had to work as hard as he could and the only way to find out where that line was, was by working harder than he could, suffering the consequences, and fixing his schedule to allow for it. Ron still hadn't accepted that he'd needed to give up Quidditch, and Hermione would never get past the fact that he was lying looking like hell on a hospital bed.

As soon as he finished the last of his meal and lay back down to sleep the bowl disappeared and his door started to open. Harry wished he had eaten even slower.

Ron and Hermione walked in quietly, looking guilty.

"What happened to you?" Harry asked, looking back and forth between them.

"Madam Pomfrey is scary when she's mad, mate." Ron said, darting his eyes back and forth as if searching for her before looking back at Harry and grinning.

"I think she was seriously considering running off and grabbing a pitchfork and starting a crusade, the way she looked at us. She wants us dead." Ron said.

"You should have seen her when she caught Ron yelling-" Hermione started.

"But I wasn't even yelling, I told you that! My voice was forceful!" Ron interrupted loudly. "Forceful." He added in a quieter voice, blushing as Hermione just grinned at him.

"Damn." Ron said, obviously giving in. "But I was forceful because I was right." He said.

"Right about what?" Hermione asked, sounding self-pleased.

"That we shouldn't argue in front of Harry, he's-" Ron started, before lifting a hand to cover his eyes and groan. "Hi Harry." He said, smacking himself in the forehead lightly.

Hermione laughed, and turned to Harry.

"Hey, Harry." She said, smiling. Harry found himself grinning in return.

"Hey." Harry answered.

"You're both idiots." Harry said, looking back and forth between them.

"Lil bit." Ron said, still hitting himself.

"Ron, stop, seriously. You'll only kill more brain cells, and I'm mostly sure you need them." Hermione said, grabbing Ron's hand and pulling it away from him.

"Anyway, how are you, Harry?" Hermione asked, dragging Ron with her as she pulled herself up to stand beside his bed.

"Holy hell you look like shite." Ron said, staring at Harry as he

approached.

"How much did Pomfrey tell you?" Harry asked, glancing between them.

"She just said you were sick, but woah, mate. Pomfrey wouldn't let us in because you were contagious. I guess you're not anymore, ey?" Ron asked.

"That or Pomfrey really does want you dead." Harry said, leaning his head back and forth as if trying to figure out which one it was.

"Yeah. Good point." Ron said, biting his lip and glancing back at the door.

"So what sickness do you have, Harry? Pomfrey wouldn't say a thing, she pulled patient confidentiality." Hermione asked.

"And we all know she's never cared about it before." Ron added.

Pomfrey, thank you, but there's nothing I need to hide in this one. Harry thought silently.

"She was lying." Harry admitted aloud, bracing himself for their collective explosion.

"lying?" Hermione interrupted. "That's ridiculous, why would she lie-"

"It's your studying, ey mate? You haven't been sleeping or eating, and it caught up to you." Ron said calmly, looking into Harry's eyes with what looked like a glare on his face.

"That's essentially it." Harry answered, matching the gaze as strongly as he could. He hadn't been stupid, he needed to not stand down about that.

"You? What? Harry-" Hermione started, her eyes glancing over his body repeatedly.

"But why do you suddenly look like you almost died?" She asked.

"Polyjuice." Harry answered succinctly, trusting her to figure out the rest.

"How long?" asked Ron, leaving Hermione still sputtering.

"Since the beginning of the year." Harry said, glancing between them and wondering how bad the conversation was going to get.

"Three months?" Ron asked. Harry hadn't ever heard Ron's voice cold before. It sounded wrong, not silly or young or upset like Ron's voice was supposed to always sound.

"I had to lie to make sure I could study." Harry replied, careful to stay honest. He hadn't thought he was going to care about the conversation very much, there was no strict reason to care, but he'd lied to them for months, and he'd never done that before. They were the first and only close friends he'd ever had, what was he supposed to do with just having their anger now? He felt almost like he was begging even though he'd kept any plea from his voice.

What right do they have to be angry?

"Yeah, mate." Ron said, still just gazing at him.

What does that mean?

"Harry, you need to see a mind-healer. There are dozens of ministry-certified mind-healers in Scotland I'm sure. You need-" Hermione cut herself off. "You need help, Harry."

"I don't need therapy, Hermione." Harry groaned.

"Bloody hell, mate." Ron cursed calmly, shaking his head as he looked around the room.

"Harry, look at yourself! You can't even stand up? Look at your arms, I can see the bones cross in them! Look at your eyes, your hair, how did you do this to yourself?" She cried out.

"Practice. Potions." Harry answered as briefly as he could.

"Potions?" Hermione blanched.

I need to stop this now.

"Hermione, Ron, listen to me. Let me think, but then really listen, okay?" Harry said, catching and holding each of their gazes until he was sure they were paying attention to his words. Then he let the room fall silent and considered what he needed to say.

"Sirius's death was partly my fault." Harry stated. "Wait, Ron, just listen." Harry stopped Ron as he opened her mouth to deny it. "If I'd studied Occlumency when I was told it was needed, he wouldn't have died and I'm never going to have anything close to a father again. My irresponsibility, and my foolishness, led to a man's death that night, and Dumbledore fought the man directly responsible for it while I hid behind a statue."

Harry wanted to spit at the memory. Ron and Hermione were staring at him now, both looking like they were trying to figure out whether to punch a wall or cry. Harry remembered that feeling, and carefully pushed his thoughts back to what he needed to say.

"The thought of that isn't the only thing that pushed me to study. You guys could die because of this war. Your parents could die. Everyone we know could die. I have to fight that, if there is a way for me to fight that I am going to do it. This war is already really, really bad, the



Prophet has been understating it. The raids aren't clean, they aren't just a name of a town and a report of missing and wounded. The Prophet hasn't reported the dead muggles, or where the bodies are left, or the fact that bodies smell, fire smells, people are dying, families are dying, and I've heard and smelled and watched it happen. I can't just keep watching." Harry said, trying to distance himself from the words even as they literally brought the taste of ash to his mouth. Harry tried to swallow, and couldn't. He decided not to try, and continued.

"You want me to get better, right? You want Pomfrey to heal me and then release me to a mind-healer who would make me care about grades and Quidditch and fun again so I would go out and hang out with you guys. I'm not going to get better. There is a chance that I am the only one who is able to win this war for the wizarding world. I don't know why that is or if I have a power that others can't predict, but if there is even a chance of that being true, I need to learn about magic. I need to kill a brilliant wizard who has had 50 more years to learn about how magic works, though I've only been studying for half a year. I panic about every second because I need every second that I have, and I need to spend it studying, whether that means permanently damaging my kidneys or no. I need to learn how to duel with my left hand, how to duel without a wand, and if that means I need to break every bone in my hand, I need to do it. If cutting off my hand entirely meant I would win this war, then of course I would do it. That's not some addiction that I need to cure. I need to study because I need to learn, I just need to be more careful about my health from now on, and I'll be doing that." Harry promised.

Getting sick here doesn't change anything. Harry concluded to himself. I'll follow each of Pomfrey's instructions, to the letter, until this is done.

"But Harry, you are lying unable to walk on a hospital cot right now. There's nothing right about that!" Hermione answered, blinking rapidly as she tried to argue.

"Remember when Ron let himself be taken in that chess game first year, so that we could go on? That's what I'm doing, just – slower." Harry said, stumbling over the last word.

"Yeah and I hated it then too!" Hermione said, her voice raising to almost a yell.

"But it was necessary, and I could do it, so I did, Hermione." Ron answered, speaking slowly like he was only realizing the words as he said them.

"Ron, look at him!" Hermione replied, spinning to face Ron and pointing back at Harry. "Everyone has been enabling this! Where the hell was Dumbledore? This is wrong, this is killing him, and no one is arguing that maybe we can work together to win this damn war rather than let him die trying to do it himself! Screw the Prophecy!" She yelled.

"Hermione I am not trying to win this war alone." Harry said. "I think I'm going to try and join the Order during this winter break, but if we are going to win, and I need us to win, we need everyone to be the best wizard they can be. I'm getting there. Six months ago I was a useless underage wizard who had barely learned how to use a wand. I needed this training so that I could join the effort at all. Supposedly I need to win this war for the world, the bloody 'prophecy' and all that, and I'm going to work damn hard trying, but mostly I'm just going to do what needs to be done in every second I have free to do it." Harry answered.

"But no one can work every second of their lives! I tried that too, remember?" Hermione screeched.

"That's why I didn't even try to get a timeturner." Harry answered, nodding.

"Harry, you need to stop, you need help, a mind-healer or anyone, you haven't even let us talk to you in months. God, Harry you might have died and we wouldn't have even noticed something was really wrong. You looked okay, you looked healthy, you were just working hard is all and I was so glad to see that in you." Hermione stood and stared at Harry, letting her eyes become more and more reflective until tears started falling down her cheeks. Finally she turned and silently buried her head in Ron's shoulder.

"Come on 'Mione, we should let Harry sleep." Ron said, rubbing her back and pulling her toward the door.

They left before Harry knew what to say.

The room was strangely silent afterward, and somehow Harry felt it would be disrespectful to pick up his book to study as he'd planned. He stayed still, staring at the ceiling, and pretending the quiet was restful.

~~HP~~

Harry quickly learned to hate the stillness that came with bedrest. He wasn't used to not doing anything, and though Pomfrey had allowed him an hour of study time, he still had 23 hours a day to spend in that stillness. Every day that dragged by felt longer, which Pomfrey said was logical as he was sleeping through less and less of it. Harry could barely see how that was good news when it meant he got to spend that much time counting shadows on the ceiling. He knew he was bored when he was glad Pomfrey announced that Dumbledore wanted to see him. Dumbledore couldn't possibly waste his time right then, and hopefully the headmaster would show him some respect and give him some information he could use.

"Hello my boy." Dumbledore greeted, as calm as ever, as he walked over to put a pensieve down on Harry's bedside table before turning and closing the infirmary room door behind him.

"Never fear for your privacy here, I daresay Pomfrey guards her wards more protectively with every passing day." He commented before conjuring a large, comfortable-looking armchair beside Harry's cot.

Harry moved over slightly as to not be too close to the Headmaster, and waited for him to take a seat.

"Even so, I should warn you, the new Minister of Magic has evidently taken up Fudge's mantle in trying to meet with you." Dumbledore said as he sat.

"Fudge was trying to reach me, after everything he did last year?" Harry asked, wishing he'd had the chance to shout at the smarmy man.

"Indeed. I told Cornelius there was no chance of it, but the idea did not die when he left office. Within hours of Scrimgeour's appointment we met and he demanded that I arrange a meeting with you." Dumbledore said.

"And you didn't tell me about that" Harry asked, annoyed.

"Would you have needed me to have done so?" Dumbledore asked, his eyes twinkling.

"Meeting with the Minsters was my decision, professor." Harry answered. Wondering how many times Dumbledore had simply done something for him.

"Would you like me to set up a meeting?" Dumbledore asked.

And what, just hand me a time that I should meet him in your office with no regard for what I'd be doing at the time?

"No, I'll handle it." Harry said.

"Well, I suggest we press on." Dumbledore said, pulling a vial of memory out of his robe pocket. "I'd like us to see just two memories more, if you are strong enough now for it. The second has taken me these months to fully acquire."

Harry watched as Dumbledore poured the memory into the pensieve before deciding to leave most of his questions for afterward.

"And Madam Pomfrey said I was healthy enough for this?" Harry asked.

"Quite, she says you are making quite the remarkable recovery." Dumbledore answered, before gesturing to the pensieve. "So, we meet this evening to continue the tale of Tom Riddle, whom we left last lesson poised on the threshold of his years at Hogwarts. You will remember how excited he was to hear that he was a wizard, that he refused my company on a trip to Diagon Alley, and that I, in turn, warned him against continued thievery when he arrived at school.

"Well, the start of the school year arrived and with it came Tom Riddle, a quiet boy in his secondhand robes, who lined up with the other first years to be sorted. He was placed in Slytherin House almost the moment that the Sorting Hat touched his head. How soon Riddle learned that he famous founder of the House could talk to snakes, I do not know-- perhaps that very evening. The knowledge can only have excited him and increased his sense of self-importance.

"However, if he was frightening or impressing fellow Slytherins with displays of Parseltongue in their common room, no hint of I reached the staff. He showed no sign of outward arrogance or aggression at an unusually talented and very good-looking orphan, he naturally drew attention and sympathy from the staff almost from the moment of his arrival. He seemed polite, quiet, and thirsty for knowledge. Nearly all were most favorably impressed by him."

"You didn't tell him what he'd been like at the orphanage then." Harry wagered.

"No, I did not. Though he had shown no hint of remorse, it was possible that he felt sorry for how he had behaved before and was resolved to turn over a fresh leaf. I chose to give him that chance." Dumbledore answered.

Was he already trusting people despite how much it endangered others? Harry asked himself.

"Did you trust him?" Harry asked directly, guessing he wasn't going to receive a yes or no answer to it.

"Let us say that I did not take it for granted that he was trustworthy. I had, as I have already indicated, resolved to keep a close eye upon him, and so I did. I cannot pretend that I gleaned a great deal from my observations at first. He was very guarded with me; he felt, I am sure, that in the thrill of discovering his true identity he had told me a little too much. He was careful never to reveal as much again, but he could not take back what he let slip in his excitement, nor what Mrs. Cole had confided in me. However, he had the sense never to try and charm me as he charmed so many of my colleagues." Dumbledore answered.

Harry thought about it, and resigned himself to the fact that he couldn't find fault in that explanation.

When did I start hoping for overwhelming signs of Dumbledore's incompetence? I used to look so hard for proof that he was perfect. Harry wondered, though he knew he was right that Dumbledore was not close to perfect anymore.

"As he moved up the school, he gathered about him a group of dedicated friends; I call them that, for want of a better term, although

as I have already indicated, Riddle undoubtedly felt no affection for any of them. This group had a kind of dark glamour within the castle. They were a motley collection; a mixture of weak seeking protection, the ambitious seeking some shared glory, and the thuggish gravitating toward a leader who could show them more refined forms of cruelty. In other words, they were the forerunners of the Death Eaters, and indeed some of them became the first Death Eaters after leaving Hogwarts.

"Rigidly controlled by Riddle, they were never detected in open wrongdoing, although their seven years at Hogwarts were marked by a number of nasty incidents to which they were never satisfactorily linked, the most serious of which was, of course, the opening of the Chamber of Secrets, which resulted in the death of a girl. As you know, Hagrid was wrongly accused of that crime."

"Riddle was a secondary student during this though," Harry said, confused. "He was what, 13 years old when he started this 'reign of terror'?"

"Thirteen years old and already preparing to become the worst Dark Wizard I have ever known." Dumbledore answered, his blue eyes seeming to darken under his words as he caught Harry's gaze. "Let me tell you, Harry, one of the scariest things one can witness is true malice in the glance of a child."

Harry stayed silent, feeling his respect for Dumbledore rise slightly as he held the gaze of the old man.

"I have not been able to find many memories of Riddle at Hogwarts," continued Dumbledore, his tone lightening slightly as he placed his withered hand on the Pensieve. "Few who knew him then are prepared to talk about him; they are too terrified. What I know, I found out after he had left Hogwarts, after much painstaking effort, after tracing those few who could be tricked into speaking, after searching old records and questioning Muggle and wizard witnesses alike.

"Those whom I could persuade to talk told me that Riddle was obsessed with his parentage. This is understandable, of course; he had grown up in an orphanage and naturally wished to know how he came to be there. It seems that he searched in vain for some trace of Tom Riddle senior on the shields in the trophy room, on the lists of prefects in the old school records, even in the books of Wizarding history. Finally he was forced to accept that his father had never set foot in Hogwarts. I believe that it was then that he dropped the name forever, assumed the identity of Lord Voldemort and began his investigations into his previously despised mother's family – the woman whom, you will remember, he had thought could not be a witch if she had succumbed to the shameful human weakness of death."

"But what about Durmstrang and such, there are other wizarding schools." Harry pointed out.

"Ah yes, but Hogwarts is the best wizarding school, or so he was taught at the time. The truth is that wizarding schools are simply different, but to Tom Riddle at the time, being the best was all that mattered. He had to be better at everything he was doing than anyone else, and I'm afraid to say that for the most part, his wish was realized. He was a brilliant mind and a brilliant wizard, and it came back to haunt him terribly, along with the rest of the wizarding world." Dumbledore replied.

"All he had to go on was the single name 'Marvolo,' which he knew from those who ran the orphanage had been his mother's father's name. Finally after painstaking research through old books of Wizarding families, he discovered the existence of Slytherin's surviving line. In the summer of his sixteenth year, he left the orphanage to which he returned annually and set off to find his Gaunt relatives. And now, Harry, if you will just lean forward..." Dumbledore picked up the pensieve and held it in front of them both as Harry struggled to lean forward without just falling onto the basin to slowly



sink his face through the surface of the memory.

Harry found himself in the Guant's house again, which now looked like years of filth had piled upon what had been a disgusting home before. The only light came from a single guttering candle placed at the feet of a man with hair and beard so overgrown Harry couldn't find where hair became eyes and mouth. He was slumped in an armchair by the fireplace, and Harry wondered for a moment whether he was dead before remembering that he'd have to be alive for this memory to exist at all.

There came a loud knock on the door and the man jerked awake, raising a wand in his right hand and a short knife in his left.

The door creaked open. There on the threshold, holding an old-fashioned lamp, stood a tall, dark-haired, handsome boy Harry recognized at once as the teenage Tom Riddle.

Riddle's eyes moved slowly around the hovel and then found the man in the armchair. For a few seconds they looked at each other, then the man staggered upright, the many empty bottles at his feet clattering and tinkling across the floor.

"YOU!" he bellowed, hurtling drunkenly at the teenager, wand and knife held up in front of him. "YOU!"

"Stop." Riddle spoke in Parseltongue, Harry recognized at the last moment. The old man skidded into the table, sending moldy pots crashing loudly to the floor. He stared at Riddle, waiting in silence while they contemplated each other. Riddle looked a hundred times more sophisticated, staring down at the drunken man with a slight sneer on his face that made him resemble a very attractive Snape.

"You speak it?" Asked the man.

"Yes, I speak it," said Riddle. He moved forward into the room,

allowing the door to swing shut behind him. Harry could not help but feel a resentful admiration for Voldemort's complete lack of fear. His face merely continued its expression of disgust and, perhaps, disappointment.

Talk about a shitty family, Harry thought, eying the drunkard. Vernon, fifty years ago.

"Where is Marvolo?" Riddle asked.

"Dead," said the other. "Died years ago, didn't he?"

Riddle frowned.

"Who are you, then?"

"I'm Morfin, ain't I?"

Helpful, Harry thought, understanding Riddle's look of frustrated disgust.

"Marvolo's son?" Riddle tried again.

"Course I am, then..." Morfin pushed the hair out of his dirty face, and Harry saw that he wore Marvolo's black-stoned ring on his right hand.

"I thought you was that Muggle," whispered Morfin. "You look mighty like that Muggle."

This must have sucked for Riddle, Harry thought, wishing this wasn't one more thing he was forced to watch.

"What Muggle?" said Riddle sharply.

"That Muggle what my sister took a fancy to, that Muggle what lives

in the big house over the way," said Morfin, spitting onto the floor between them. "You look right like him. Riddle. But he's older now, in 'e? He's older 'n you, ow I think on it..."

Morfin swayed a little, looking dazed and clutching the edge of the table for support. "He come back, see," he added stupidly.

Tom was gazing at Morfin as though appraising his possibilities. Now he moved a little closer and said, "Riddle came back?"

"Ar, he left her, and serve her right, marrying filth!" said Morfin, spitting on the floor again. "Robbed us, mind, before she ran off! Where's the locket, eh, where's Slytherin's locket?"

Tom did not answer. Morfin was working himself into a rage again; he brandished his knife and shouted, "Dishonored us, she did, that little slut! And who're you, coming here and asking questions about all that? It's over, innit...it's over..."

The old Morfin looked away, staggering slightly, and Tom moved forward. As he did so, an unnatural darkness fell, extinguishing Tom's lamp and Morfin's candle, extinguishing everything.

Dumbledore's finger's closed tightly around Harry's shoulder and pulled him up and back into the hard white light of the infirmary room.

"Guant doesn't remember anything further than that, I gather?" Harry said.

"When he awoke the next morning, he was lying on the floor, quite alone. Marvolo's ring had gone." Dumbledore replied, nodding as pulled the Pensieve from over Harry's lap.

"Meanwhile, in the village of Little Hangleton, a maid was running along the High Street, screaming that there were three bodies lying in the drawing room of the big house: Tom Riddle Senior and his

mother and father. The Muggle authorities were perplexed. As far as I am aware, they do not know to this day how the Riddles died, for the Avada Kedavra curse does not usually leave any sign of damage...The exception sits before me," Dumbledore added, with a nod to Harry's scar.

"The Ministry, on the other hand, knew at once that this was a wizard's murder. They also knew that a convicted Muggle-hater lived across the valley from the Ride house, A Muggle-hater who had already been imprisoned once for attacking one of the murdered people. So the Ministry called upon Morfin. They did not need to question him, to use Veritaserum or Legilimency. He admitted to the murder on the spot, giving details only the murderer could know. He was proud, he said, to have killed the Muggles, had been awaiting his chance all these years. He handed over his wand, which was proved at once to have been used to kill the Riddles." Dumbledore related.

"And the Ministry believed that? What about the Imperius curse?, you'd think checking for that would be standard practice." Harry asked.

"Ah but Harry, curses must be invented, and to the Ministry's knowledge, such a power did not exist. I'm afraid they did not know to check for it as you say, and Morfin lived out the remainder of his life in a low Dementor zone in Azkaban, forever lamenting the loss of the Marvolo ring. He is now buried beside the prison, alongside the other poor souls who have expired within its walls."

"So Riddle invented the Imperius curse?" Harry asked, trying not to sound impressed despite himself.

"He did. It's one of the reasons Voldemort is one of the worst Dark Wizards ever seen. The Ministry cannot check every Death Eater conviction for whether or not their claim at being Imperius'd is true. It is safe to be a Death Eater, and that is a very terrifying concept, as

Voldemort works hard to ensure that it is distinctly unsafe to move against him." Dumbledore said.

"We have no memories to show us this, but I think we can be fairly sure what happened. Voldemort Stupified his uncle, took his wand, and proceeded across the valley to 'the big house over the way.' There he murdered the Muggle man who had abandoned his witch mother, and, for good measure, his Muggle grandparents, thus obliterating the last of the unworthy Riddle line and revenging himself upon the father who never wanted him. Then he returned to the Gaunt hovel, implanted a false memory in his uncle's mind, laid Morfin's wand beside its unconscious owner, pocketed the ancient ring he wore, perhaps cast the first incidence of the Imperius curse ever known, and departed."

"I extracted this memory with difficulty. When I saw what it contained, I attempted to use it to secure Morfin's release from Azkaban. Before the Ministry reached their decision, however, Morfin had died. Whatever Morfin was, he did not deserve to die as he did, blamed for murders he had not committed. But it is getting late, and I want you to see this other memory before we part..."

Dumbledore slowly poured another vial of memories into the Pensieve, though the contents stuck to the sides and only slowly sludged out of the vial, as though they had congealed slightly.

Do memories go bad? Harry wondered, unsure how the magic was expected to work at all. How could 'memories' exist in solid form at all?

"This will not take long," said Dumbledore, when he had finished emptying the phial. "We shall be back before you know it. Once more into the Pensieve then..." Dumbledore said, pushing the Pensieve over Harry's lap again.

Harry felt his abs and arms shake as he tried to tip himself over and

hold himself up with his hands clenched in his sheets. In a second his grip had slipped and he was falling over, toward Dumbledore and the side of the bed.

"Good that we only have this last one then." Dumbledore said, grabbing Harry's shoulder with his good hand and weakly pushing him back up. "Seems we are both tired." He said.

Harry nodded and bent again, this time managing to hold himself as he pushed his face back into the Pensieve, only to find himself in an office with an enormously fat, bald old man sitting in a circle of teenagers wearing Hogwarts robes.

"Horace Slughorn." Came Dumbledore's voice in his ear, though Dumbledore had not followed him into the memory. It was a strange sensation, hearing a disembodied voice like that, and it reminded Harry too much of being inside Voldemort's mind. Harry shuddered, just before recognizing Riddle sitting beside the older man, looking relaxed and easy-going, almost belying the Marvolo ring sitting on his right hand.

Hi guys! I got fun reviews & I've been having some freetime, so here's your next update! Read me and Review!!

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~~HP~~

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Harry sat in silence when once again he found himself blinking out the bright infirmary light, trying to think over what he'd just seen. That Professor Slughorn had told Riddle everything he needed to know , that ripping apart one soul granted immortality.

Immortality only comes to the miserable, Harry thought, wondering at the strange truth behind the words 'the good die young'. So Riddle had destroyed himself, without even knowing what he was sacrificing, by killing.

And I'm going to do the same thing, sacrificing my soul for this damn war, whatever that means.

Dumbledore seemed to pick up on his mood, and stayed silent, for which Harry was quietly grateful. Harry looked over to him slowly, and found himself unable to meet his old mentor's eyes before he asked his next question.

"So what does ripping the soul apart really mean, in magical terms? Not every killer gains immortality through horcruxes." Harry said quietly, moving his gaze to stare at the ceiling.

"I assume in learning about the Patronus spell, you got familiar with the notion of subjective spells, spells which depend on your state of mind. The Horcruxes depend on the state of mind that comes to humans when they are killing, regardless of how jaded they are, a universal feeling which many would deny even exists, except for the

incontrovertible evidence of this spell. As for your first question, it must be understood that one can not separate a wizard from his power completely. Magic comes from life, it's like a overflowing of it, and that magic is tied into the personality and very identity of that wizard. There is however, a way to separate most of that mixture, which is now referred to as 'soul', though I daresay you can guess how controversial that term is, from the human source in question. Through an extremely complex magical working that I admit I do not have full understanding of, a wizard can tear his life into pieces, effectively leaving himself with one part, and leaving, in this case 6, tied into physical objects." Dumbledore explained.

"By life are you talking about his G.M.I?" Harry asked, trying to wrap his mind around splitting the ability to make life and magic.

Dumbledore looked at him with an expression of surprise and pride etched over his face.

"Well done, my boy." The headmaster said, obviously not realizing how condescending he sounded.

"I don't believe that without the Horcruxes Voldemort would be seven times as powerful as he is, as I can't imagine how G.M.I could be any more or less powerful, it just is, so what did Voldemort lose when he 'split his soul'?" Harry asked, looking at Dumbledore.

"He lost the balance in his personality, I believe. We all have different sides to us, different moods. Voldemort is very much so not Tom Riddle. He is a product of that man, yes, but his mind is a simplification of Tom's. As far as I've seen, he wants power, and absolute control, and very little else. Destroying him will not be murder, my boy." Dumbledore explained softly, looking at Harry with what looked like a mixture of worry and pity.

"And watching death, he likes that too. It fascinates him, and makes him feel all the more powerful, to see what he won't do." Harry said,



remembering Voldemort's glee at the raids.

Dumbledore blinked once behind his thick glasses, and put a gentle hand on Harry's shoulder.

"I think I've underestimated you, Harry. I ask far too much of you, and answer very little of your questions." Dumbledore said.

"Tell me what you know of the Horcruxes." Harry replied, softening his tone.

"This memory mostly confirms what I already supposed, that Voldemort has chosen to split his soul into seven pieces, as seven is a traditionally strong number in wizarding lore. The seventh part of his soul, however maimed, resides inside his regenerated body. That was the part of him that lived a spectral existence for so many years during his exile, without that, he has no self at all, it's the part that cannot be separated from a wizard's life. Perhaps Voldemort has even managed to split himself up so much that he is barely more than that now.

"That seventh piece of soul will be the last that anybody wishing to kill Voldemort must attack – the piece that lives in his body. You have already destroyed one of the six horcruxes, being of course the diary you pierced in your second year year."

That would be part of why Lucius was so disfavored. Harry realized and quickly led his mind away from wondering at the punishments the man must have earned for his mistake.

I have destroyed another, Marvolo's ring, which I found in the shack the Marvolo family once inhabited. Fortunately for us, Voldemort did not treat his Horcruxes like portkeys, making them out of empty firewhiskey bottles and the like. He kept to his tradition of keeping trophies. I believe Voldemort would have chosen his Horcruxes with some care, favoring objects worthy of the honor." Dumbledore said.

"The locket, then." Harry remembered.

"Quite." Dumbledore agreed, nodding. "Along, I am guessing, with Hufflepuff's cup. I suspect he set out for something from Gryffindor and Ravenclaw to complete the set, however, I cannot hazard much from there as he was never allowed to search the school for relics after he'd begun his mission. I am forced to conclude that he never fulfilled his ambition of collecting four founder' objects. He definitely had two – he may have found three – that is the best we can do for now. Which of course, leaves us with at least one more unspoken for. I wonder what you will say when I confess that I have been curious for a while about the behavior of the Snake, Nagini?" Dumbledore said, leaning forward.

I wonder when he silenced this room, Harry wondered, as Dumbledore leaned forward to continue sharing secrets.

"The snake?" said Harry, raising an eyebrow. "He's foolish enough to make a Horcrux from an animal that can think and move for itself?"

"Well, it is indeed inadvisable to do so," said Dumbledore, "However, if my calculations are correct, Voldemort was still at least one Horcrux short of his goal of six when he entered your parents' house with the intention of killing you. He believed that in killing you, he was destroying the danger the prophecy had outlined. He believed he was making himself invincible. I am sure that he was intending to make his final Horcrux with your death. I wondered at what object he brought with him for the spell, before I realized that yours was the only death Voldemort had ever intentionally brought Nagini along for. He is perhaps as fond of her as he can be of anything; he certainly likes to keep her close, and he seems to have a unusual amount of control over her, even for a Parselmouth." Dumbledore explained.

"And he failed at that death, so maybe he's done it now." Harry filled in. "So, the diary's gone, the ring's gone, the cup, the locket, and the

snake are still intact, and you think there might be a Horcrux that was once Ravenclaw's or Gryffindor's, and I assume you've been trying to find out more over this school year." Harry surmised.

"Precisely," Dumbledore answered, his face dropping with what looked like bone-deep weariness. "And it seems I've been away a bit too much, to not notice the combined effects of polyjuice and mandrake draught on one of my students." Dumbledore said, eyeing Harry intensely.

As a Headmaster he's been 'too often gone' for years.

"You should not attempt to run a school and win a war at the same time, Professor." Harry said. "It is not fair to your students."

Dumbledore nodded sagely.

"A wise observation, Harry, and keenly felt." Dumbledore said.

Meaningless. Harry observed quietly, though somehow he still appreciated Dumbledore's slow nod and soft tone.

He cares, he's just got too much. Harry thought, his view of the man still softening.

"I should have been training you for years, my boy, you would not have done this to yourself." Dumbledore said, glancing down at the blankets bundled around Harry's body.

"I've learned a lot, professor." said Harry in quiet defense of himself.

"It is not this kind of power that you need to cultivate, Harry." Dumbledore said. "You have a power that Voldemort has never had. Given everything that has happened to you, it is a great and remarkable thing, that when given all of the tools Voldemort could give you to help you in his own demise. You were able to see into his

thoughts, his ambitions, you can understand his Parseltongue, you have a privileged insight into Voldemort's world that Death Eaters have killed attempting to obtain, and yet you have never been seduced by the Dark Arts, never, even for a second, shown the slightest desire to become one of Voldemort's followers." Dumbledore said, staring at Harry with what looked like admiration.

"He kills for fun." Harry said, wanting to spit across the floor like Morfin.

"In spite of all the temptation you have endured, all the suffering, you remain pure of heart, just as pure as you were at the age of eleven, when you stared into a mirror that reflected your heart's desire and it showed you only the way to thwart Lord Voldemort, and not immortality or riches. Harry, have you any idea how few wizards could have seen what you saw in that mirror?"

"You are idealizing me, Dumbledore." Harry said. "I was eleven, and hated him with an eleven year old's look at the world. Of course I didn't think of immortality and riches, I was thinking about keeping the man who killed my parents from something that he wanted. I think Tom Riddle would have done the same, way back when." Harry said, considering the child that he had seen Dumbledore manipulate so heavy-handedly.

"That may be." said Dumbledore, looking thoughtful. "But consider your time here, Harry. The power you have that the Dark Lord knows not, is definitely your power to love. I have been irresponsible with you to the extreme, not keeping you safe even from your own professors, and yet there is very little evidence of that in talking to you. You are, for the most part, innocent, or at least that's the way it seemed a year ago. Now, I believe you are beginning to grow up, and I will show you the good man that you become, and say this all again." Dumbledore promised, his eyes sparkling.

He's always believed that about me. Harry thought, trying to process

what that meant. It sounded parental, and protective, and Harry wondered how important he was to the man. Dumbledore was becoming less and less competent, Harry had to see that, but perhaps that didn't mean he was becoming a poor mentor.

"Thank you." Harry said succinctly, looking into Dumbledore's eyes and trying fruitlessly to read them. "Now I just need to find another power the Dark Lord knows not, one that's a bit more helpful than throwing candy hearts and valentines at him." Harry grumbled, throwing his head back onto his pillow in frustration as Dumbledore laughed.

"Candy hearts, I forgot about those." Dumbledore said lightly, patting Harry's cot as he stood up.

"New office password?" Harry guessed, watching the headmaster laugh as he sent his chair off to sit beside Pomfrey's with a flick of his wand.

"Perhaps. Mostly I'm just going to send out for a box of them. For some reason I find myself missing that chalky taste." Dumbledore said listlessly, almost sounding like Loony Lovegood as he stared into the space above Harry's cot.

"I should let you rest, my boy, before Pomfrey comes in trying to set my robes on fire again." Dumbledore said, turning and walking toward the door.

"Again?" Harry asked, before shaking his head. "Wait, I'm feeling fine and I want to talk to you about a something." He said, far more respectfully than he had planned.

Dumbledore nodded, and turned slowly to stand in front of Harry's cot again.

"Sirius's belongings?" Harry asked, wincing at the memories and

smells of Mundungus Fletcher that flashed back into his mind.

"I delegated the project to Author Weasley, who has a certain skill in tracking illegal sales of magical objects. I asked him to pass on what he's gathered before Christmas. Speaking of which, you'll be glad to know that the Weasleys have again demanded that you join them for the holidays, and that Pomfrey's ready with her wand to back up the invitation." Dumbledore related.

Harry grinned at the image of Madam Pomfrey alighting Dumbledore's robes, and nodded, noting that Dumbledore understood the weight Pomfrey's orders held.

"I'll go." Harry promised.

"Very well, my boy." Dumbledore nodded, smiling slightly as he turned to leave.

~~HP~~

"Am I supposed to have my magic back by now?" Harry asked Pomfrey the next day as she helped him swing his legs over the side of the cot.

"You'll heal soon." Pomfrey replied.

"That's meaningless." Harry said as Pomfrey grabbed his arm and placed it over her own.

"Is it?" Pomfrey asked, looking up with her eyebrows raised. "Now I'm going to support your weight, but I want you to swing forward and get your feet on the ground."

"Yes." Harry said. "Let me guess, it's medically unwise for you to answer that." He said as he shifted forward until his toes met the ground and started to stand.

"If I answer yes, you become stressed. If no, you are likely to become frustrated with your progress and give up attempting to heal quickly." Pomfrey answered, "Now concentrate, and stand, your body should have strengthened enough by now to manage this." She said.

"Ah." Harry answered, almost immediately having to throw his weight onto where her arms grabbed him as his legs tried to bend beneath him. He struggled to find his balance, and finally got both feet under him and his knees locked.

"Good." Pomfrey said, slowly releasing her support, though she kept a hold on him.

"When am I going to be able to walk?" asked Harry as he shifted his weight back and forth carefully.

"It depends on your magic, Mr. Potter. You can probably take another muscle strengthening potion tomorrow, that will help." She answered.

"Should I get back in bed now?" Harry asked as his head began to swim.

"Just back up, and let your knees bend onto the cot." Pomfrey ordered. Harry stepped backward and half-fell as his knees met the side of the cot too quickly for him to balance. He hit the cot, relieved to be lying down, and saw Pomfrey stripping most of his pillows from the bed.

"Sleep now, I'm going to allow your friends to visit you when you are again rested, Mr. Potter." Pomfrey announced, helping him arrange himself straight on the cot.

"Ron and Hermione again?" Harry asked, knowing he sounded tired at the idea. They would get angry again, he knew it, and he hated shouting.

"Gryffindor tower has been attempting large-scale raids into here for weeks." Pomfrey corrected, standing.

"Thank you." Harry said, feeling himself sink into his bed comfortably.

He woke up to see Ginny working at a desk in the corner.

"Snape again?" Harry asked, wincing. Ginny looked up and nodded, mirroring his grimace.

"You're supposed to take that vial, walk around this room once using the wall if necessary, and rest. No studying until after you've slept." Ginny ordered, her voice cold.

"You alright?" Harry asked, reaching for the vial but staring at the girl.

"Not particularly." She announced, glaring at the wall as she said it.

"But what did the wall do?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow at her. A grin appeared and vanished on Ginny's face in an instant.

"Dean and I broke up." She said, her voice only slightly lighter.

"Why?" Harry asked before he gulped down the potion. "Bleck." He added, scraping his tongue against his teeth to try and get rid of the nasty film strength potions always left behind.

"He opened a door for me." Ginny replied without emotion.

"That bastard." Harry scoffed as he moved to sit up.

Ginny shifted to lean her elbows on her knees as she stared at her clasped hands.

"That was actually what sparked the argument but we'd been at



each other's throats for stupid shite for awhile. I think he wants a girl whose cute and wants someone strong to protect her. I want someone strong so we can wrestle each other and come out equal. I'd felt single for weeks, which was certainly sign that it wasn't going to work." Ginny said, shaking her head.

"Let me guess, you're too busy studying to wrestle with me." She said, looking up as he carefully pushed himself to have his feet on the floor.

"I'm going to assume you meant that literally, but either way, I'm obviously not strong for either at the moment anyway." Harry said through gritted teeth as he started to lever himself off the bed. He glanced up and saw Ginny blushing, but quickly had to look back and watch his feet as he shifted his weight onto them. To his surprise, his strength held, and he was standing without even needing to shake.

"Still, you wouldn't treat me like glass about the break." Ginny grumbled.

"No, but I am too busy and either way Ron would kill me." Harry replied, breathing hard and making sure he had a hand secure on the bed before he tried to take a step.

"True. Dead men don't make good boyfriends." Ginny said.

"Well you never know. Magic's awesome. I think technically werewolves and vampires are classified as "Active dead" by the ministry, and are still granted basic rights." Harry replied. "But then, Ron would tear me to pieces, and at that point I certainly wouldn't make a good boyfriend." Harry continued, stepping again and feeling his knees weakening.

"Shame." Ginny said, laughing.

Harry got himself past his cot to the straight wall of the room, and

started trying to figure out how the vertical wall was going to help him at all. He leaned, and pushed against it as he walked, wondering desperately how he was going to make it around the room if his head was already swimming with the effort.

"So now I've gotta figure out how Quidditch is going to work with my ex on the team. I'm not angry but he might be and that could be bleedin' awful." Ginny continued.

"Dean's on the team?" Harry asked, trying to remember.

"Yeah, he took over for Katie Bell." Ginny replied. "He's good, though Katie's better. He's a nice guy, he's just...too nice." She said.

"You're a strange one, Ginny." Harry gasped out, making his way past the infirmary room door and wishing he could just turn around and get back to the cot.

"I grew up with Fred and George as mentors, what do you expect?" She said.

"And they describe you as 'brutal'." Harry replied, grinning as he got to the corner and rested against it.

"It's high praise." Ginny grinned at him. Harry nodded and started off toward her.

"I know. Now move, no way am I making it around that chair." He said, feeling his knees shaking and trying to buckle. He closed his eyes to stop the dizziness, and kept moving forward.

"Wow you are a cripple." Ginny said. Harry opened his eyes and watched her moving both chairs from his path.

Harry nodded, not wanting to speak, and continued on his path.

"If you fall and die, it's not my fault. This is all on Pomfrey. She gave the instructions, I'm just the messenger." Ginny said, holding her hands up in front of her.

Harry nodded again, struggling around the last corner before his bed. He walked straight, holding onto the wall and staring at where he could fall down and sleep.

Tired tired tired, Harry chanted to himself as he kept moving.

He groaned when he finally got his hand on his bedcovers again. He tipped himself onto the cot and rolled straight, not even considering trying to get beneath the covers. He was going to sleep, then think about moving again.

~~HP~~

It took a week of potions and the miserable exercises around the room for Harry to manage going around the room without leaning against the wall. At that point Pomfrey declared that it was safe for him to stop taking potions entirely, and just let his magic improve. By two weeks into December, he'd started feeling the room, feeling Hogwarts's constant layer of protective wards around him that he still didn't know how to dismantle or push past. He could cast spells of his own though, and was given back his wand. Pomfrey started him on stronger potions, until he could skip around the room if he so chose, and ultimately, leave it.

"Be back here in forty five minutes, Mr. Potter. I'll have to run a full scan." Pomfrey ordered as he walked with her out of the private infirmary room into the open school ward he recognized.

Harry caught a glance of himself in the mirror and stopped short, slipping his wand into his robes so he could touch his hair and face. His hair had broken into dreadlocks, falling around his unshaven face, making him look far more like a caveman than he'd expected, and,

on him, far less respectable.

Right. No polyjuice. Harry remembered again. He was taller now, Harry noticed, feeling foolish as he wondered if he'd broken 6 feet.

"Would you want a haircut before you leave?" Pomfrey asked, holding up her wand.

"Easy enough." Harry replied, running a hand over his "braids" and cutting his hair down to a light black buzzcut. He looked strange without hair, Harry noted, staring into the mirror as the braids fell to the floor.

Harry concentrated, remembering as a child when he'd regrown his hair and reaching inside for his magic. He opened his eyes and watched his hair grow, trying to decide how long he wanted it as it flowed over his scalp.

Wow that looks nasty happening quickly, Harry noticed, watching the growing hair.

This whole endeavor takes time, Harry thought, before remembering that he was trying to cultivate much-needed respect at the school. He needed his professors to think of him as more than a student, and he certainly needed that if he was ever going to join the Order. Braids were not going to help him in that.

Harry winced at the bowl of even hair surrounding his head as he grew it out.

"Now wet your hair so I can cut it down." Pomfrey ordered, approaching him.

Harry ran his hands over the strands, wandlessly soaking them.

"Ugh." Harry complained as the water ran down the strands and

made them stick, dripping, onto his neck. His hair was longer than before. He felt Pomfrey's hands carefully pulling it back and straightening it over his neck.

Harry ran his hands over his face, adapting the wizarding shaving spell to work wandlessly.

"Stay still." Pomfrey ordered as she drew her wand in a line across the base of his hair before seemingly grabbing a pair of scissors from nowhere.

Harry watched as she cut his hair, leaving it slightly longer than before though still respectably short.

"What's nice is I could ruin this entire and you could regrow it." Pomfrey said expressionlessly as she snipped a lock away from his ear.

"Done." She said finally, stepping back and evanesco'ing the hair on the floor.

Harry ran his hands over his head again, drying his hair as gently as he could. His hair didn't look wild anymore, Harry noticed, feeling how the longer strands pulled his hair flatter against his head and neck.

"Thanks." Harry said, turning away from the mirror as Pomfrey walked away.

"Go on your walk." She called as she continued away.

Harry turned back to the mirror, only to realized that he was still dressed in infirmary robes.

"You were going to let me walk out in infirmary robes, weren't you?" Harry asked as Pomfrey walked into her office.

"Absolutely not. See you at quarter til." Pomfrey said, closing the door behind her. Harry grinned at the complete lack of sarcasm in her voice and turned away.

"Kreacher!" Harry called.

The house-elf arrived with a crack, wearing a small apron over his clean white toga. To Harry's surprise, the house-elf bowed slightly as he entered.

"The mixed-blood summoned?" Kreacher sneered, though there wasn't any vitriol in it.

"Would you please bring me a pair of black slacks, a shirt, a black sweater, and my high-quality robes from my trunk in Gryffindor tower?" Harry asked.

Kreacher just looked at him without moving, a single thick eyebrow raised.

Right.

"Kreacher, get me the things I just named from my trunk in Gryffindor tower." Harry ordered, rolling his eyes as the house-elf apparated away.

I forgot to tell him to do it right now, Harry thought too late, remembering the time Kreacher had brought him dinner three hours after he'd been ordered to.

To his surprise, Kreacher returned almost instantly, carrying the pile of the clothing. Harry thanked him, startled, and watched the house-elf bow, albeit only slightly, and apparate away.

Harry inspected the clothing, surprised not to find it destroyed in any

way or shrunk when he hadn't given specific instructions to the house-elf not to bring him the clothing in strips. The clothing fit as always, and was intact, and Harry happily dressed in the magically-fitted robes.

Thank god he's in a good mood, Harry thought, scolding himself for not being more careful with his orders to infuriating elf.

Harry stared at himself in the mirror after he'd pulled on his robes. He recognized himself but nothing more than that. He looked older without the polyjuice, his jaw had set itself strongly, and his eyes seemed darker than before. His recent haircut killed the last of the wild, young look he'd gotten used to.

He seemed like he'd just walked out of a dinner party, rather than just stepping off a racing broom, Harry thought, unsure he liked the change. Still he'd made far more significant sacrifices than a haircut and designer robes, whether or not he looked like Percy.

Harry walked out of the infirmary, already feeling tired but determined to go on the walk Pomfrey had ordered. He snuck down side staircases, listening and feeling out with his magic for anyone nearby. He didn't want company, and he wasn't sure he'd have the energy to walk down to the dungeons and back after talking to Ron or Hermione again.

He made it downstairs without hardly hearing anyone, which made sense halfway through a Tuesday school day. Harry made his way down the cold stairway into the long dungeon hallway approaching Snape's office, hoping the man would be free at the random time.

Harry knocked on Snape's office door, hurting his knuckles despite having carefully avoided the brass bolts worked into the dark wood.

Why on earth does Snape work behind a real damn dungeon door? Harry wondered, glancing over the metal boltheads and

remembering Voldemort's much more simple option.

"Enter." Snape's voice ordered from within.

Harry ran his fingers over the metal as he pushed the door open and smiled at the warm, safe, strong magic, his question answered. Metal and stone held protection spells better than anything.

Harry walked into the underground office, whistling quietly at the strength and quality of the protection spells within the room, all tied into metal or stone. Someone had done a beautiful job.

"Has your need for attention progressed so terribly that you may not even walk without making noise, Mr. Potter?" Snape asked without looking up from his desk.

"Precisely, sir, it's an affliction." Harry answered calmly as he grabbed a student chair and transfigured it within his grasp to have a cushion and arms before he carried it one-handed up to the professor's desk. Harry sat at the chair, glad Snape was still stubbornly grading his papers and making him wait, as it gave Harry the chance to study the professor. Snape looked as dark and dank as always, but no worse than he had in any other year. If it weren't for Ginny, Harry realized, he'd have no chance at guessing that Snape had been under Crucio only days before.

"If you are here solely to waste the time of those busier than yourself, Mr. Potter, you are to be yet again congratulated for your awing achievements. Your latest dramatic bid for attention did so spectacularly. I assure you your year quota has been more than accomplished. Now remove yourself to somewhere more appropriate. The trophy room, perhaps? Glory is meant to be admired, is it not?" Snape said, even as he scratched another comment onto the end of the parchment he was evidently busy grading.

"I would but I'd be late for the fanfare and release of doves waiting for



me when I leave here, professor." Harry answered, shaking his head as he leaned forward in the chair to rest his elbows on his knees.

"Then get to that, Mr. Potter. You certainly haven't wasted enough of their ill-valued time today, and far too much of mine." Snape ordered, grimacing as he read the introduction of the next student's essay.

"I have a request to make of you, Professor Snape." Harry said directly, giving up on the snide comments.

"I do not know what possessed you to think I'd agree to it, but you should see to the affliction immediately." Snape asked, dipping his quill again.

"Please teach me remedial potions." Harry said, trying to keep his voice neutral.

Snape finally looked up from his work, a sneer on his face.

"I have no interest in attempting to pound knowledge into you, Mr. Potter." Snape said, his sneer slowly fading into a completely neutral expression. "I have no doubt that you would not learn a single thing I'd attempt to teach you. You certainly haven't yet."

"It's a good thing I don't want to learn it, then." Harry replied carefully. "We both know I am far better off never touching a cauldron again." He added.

I'm helping you not get tortured, you greasy bastard, come on.

"Indeed." Snape sneered before dropping his quill in its inkpot and leaning forward on his desk. "Do you know the point of the Crucioc spell, Mr. Potter?" He asked, his face still perfectly blank.

Harry froze, unsure how to respond to the unexpected question and still trying to process how a question could be asked so

emotionlessly.

" To cast Crucio one must want more than just to torture a person, but to torture them indefinitely, to hurt them until their mind gives in. It does not leave marks, Mr. Potter, there are no physical ramifications of any sort, and yet over time it can still manage to drive someone to insanity." Snape explained before slowly leaning back into his chair, his robes folding around him. "I find your company remarkably similar, Mr. Potter." Snape said, his black eyes staring accusingly into Harry's.

Woah, meaning he'd prefer to be tortured every week than be around me? Harry thought, thrown by the idea.

It's his choice, Harry considered.

Harry nodded slowly, and pushed his weight onto the arms of his chair as he levered himself out of it. He felt the muscles in his legs protest his standing, and figured it was time to return to the infirmary in any case. He'd try Snape one more time later, to make sure Snape wouldn't accept his help to stop Voldemort's torture sessions against him.

"That's fair I suppose." Harry said, liking how neutral his voice came out.

Harry cast a lightening charm on his chair as he grabbed the back of it with his right hand. He lifted and transfigured it at once, and walked away from Snape to return it to where the uncomfortable wooden chairs were lined by the door.

"Potter. 8:00 Friday nights." Snape ordered from behind him.

Oh, I called his bluff, Harry realized, feeling foolish and glad Snape wouldn't know that the move hadn't been planned.

Thank Merlin for Occlumency, Harry thought, relieved the magical protection depended more on the strength of his concentration than on the strength of his magic. He was exhausted, and could barely feel even the Hogwarts wards anymore.

"Perfect, I'll see you Friday night." Harry confirmed, glancing back to nod at Snape.

"Evidently." Snape sneered, sounding as superior and snide as ever though he was looking distinctly interested as he stared at Harry's face.

"Goodnight professor." Harry said, carefully keeping his tone bland as he headed to leave.

Snape, as always, didn't reply.

Harry reached out for the dungeon door handle and suddenly pulled his hand back, grinning. He had an idea. Harry felt for his magic, making sure he was strong enough for two more spells, and nodded, smiling wildly.

Gotta time this right, Harry thought, pulling open the handle with his right hand and preparing his left to do two spells in rapid succession.

In a split second he'd pulled open the door, releasing the deafening sound of his fanfare spell echoing over the entire room. Harry swung open the door fully, beginning to strut outside just before casting his next spell, releasing dozens of magicked doves flying across the doorway in a loud and beautiful flutter.

Harry stood with his hands on his hips, concentrating on keeping the fanfare going as the birds cleared his way. Once they'd all disappeared into nothing he leaned back into the potion's office to grab hold of the door, grinning as he caught sight of Snape staring at him with his mouth agape. Harry swung back, pulling the office door

and closed it firmly, cutting off the fanfare as soon as the door thumped into place.

It was all he could do not to break down into hysterics and ruin the joke before he'd gotten out of earshot. He waited until he'd made his way back to the staircase, before collapsing against it to laugh and let his body prepare for the long haul back to the infirmary.

~~HP~~

If you want the fanfare song, go to the Y0utube video called Fanfare 2009.

I'm back!, Thanks for the awesome reviews, here's the next chapter, I'm updating quick now 'cause I'm on break. Happy holidays!:

~~HP~~

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Harry rested the next couple days, sleeping in the infirmary and pushing through his book. Pomfrey gave him four hours a day to study, and two to practice with actual spells, and Harry quickly returned to his project of dismantling the Hogwarts wards, though the concept was looking more and more impossible.

"How's the book coming?" Pomfrey asked from her office as Harry paced back and forth in the open infirmary ward, reading the last chapter.

"It's full of shite." Harry answered as he skimmed the last paragraph.

"Well you're healthy enough to spend the day away from here. Go on another walk, or go eat dinner in the Great Hall. Your study time is up anyway." Pomfrey said.

"Would it slow me down or help me to go on a long walk outside?" asked Harry, tossing the book into the rubbish bin as he passed it.

"How long of a walk?" Pomfrey called back.

"An hour?" Harry asked.

"Take two, go eat first, dress warmly and come back here before anything else so I can check you over." Pomfrey answered.

"Yes Ma'am." Harry replied, walking into 'his' infirmary room.

"Kreacher!" Harry called again.

There was a very loud crack, louder than Harry had expected. Harry looked down, following the sounds of scuffling and squeaks to see two house-elves rolling around on the floor where Harry had expected Kreacher to be glaring at him from. The two house-elves rolled over the floor until the one wearing a very recognizable white toga was planted on top of the other, a smaller house elf wearing a filthy old rag strung over her front.

"Winky will not insult Kreacher's master in front of Kreacher. Kreacher will shut Winky's mouth for her!" Cried Kreacher, pounding on Winky's front.

"Winky will say what she likes about Kreacher's master, oh yes, and what a master he is, filthy friend of Mudbloods, oh, what would poor Winky's master say? Young master Crouch would call Harry Potter a Mudblood himself he would, and Winky will repeat it all she likes!" Winky was shouting, getting her knobby fist free and knocking it into Kreacher's mouth. Kreacher quickly rolled over again and landed near Harry's cot with Winky pinned again.

"Kreacher! Stop!" Harry ordered loudly, sending Kreacher rushing off of the other elf.

Kreacher didn't seem to know who to glare at more, and alternated between glaring at Harry's legs and leveling Winky with a look that clearly wished her a painful death.

I ordered him never to try and shame me, Harry remembered, wondering if this was a strange interpretation of the order that forced Kreacher to fight.

"Kreacher, have I ever ordered you to fight for me?" Harry asked, realizing how twisted the ethics would become in that.

"No." Kreacher growled having evidently decided on glaring at

Harry's legs.

"Then why-"

"Harry Potter is a fool and Kreacher is ashamed to have him as a master." Kreacher interrupted before spitting on the floor next to himself.

"Right." Harry replied, having to decide that he was wasting his time, whether or not Kreacher was fighting for him. "Kreacher, go get me my trunk from Gryffindor tower now, please." Harry ordered.

To his surprise, Kreacher did not crack away immediately, but instead waited, glaring at Winky until the other house-elf disappeared. Once Winky had gone, Kreacher left with the customary crack and reappeared, a hand on Harry's trunk of clothing.

"What did you do to it?" Harry asked. The trunk was half destroyed. Its surface was covered with scratches and divots, three of its corners fully broken off. And that was only the bottom of it, Harry noticed; Kreacher had delivered the trunk upside down.

"I threw it down the stairs and tore three of its corners off. Kreacher's master is a friend of mudbloods and Kreacher does not like him as a master." Kreacher growled, glaring at the trunk now.

Harry dressed quickly, ignoring Kreacher's whispered litany against him, and left for the Great Hall, ordering the elf back to the kitchens.

Harry walked down to the Great Hall, loving that he could walk now, without limping or leaning on anything. He started to push the Great Hall door open when he heard the chattering within and realized he was about to make 'an entrance'. No one here had seen him 16 years old either, and of course everything that ever happened to him was fascinating gossip for the school.

Harry sighed and pushed the door open, wanting to snort when he saw the whispering and pointing immediately start up. He inhaled the strong scent of food as he walked toward the Gryffindor table and decided he was looking forward to eating for once. He was getting legitimately hungry, something that had to be a good sign for his health.

Harry looked for Hermione's poofy hair and blinked, unable to find it before he remembered that he couldn't remember Hermione's frizzy hair in the infirmary either. He spotted her finally in their usual area and wondered when Hermione had managed to calm down her hair enough to have the easy-looking ponytail she currently had dangling over a shoulder. Harry approached them cautiously, hoping that if either of them were still angry they wouldn't make too much of a scene, hating how silence and stares spiraled out from their area as people quieted to watch the exchange.

"Hey, Harry, sit down." Hermione invited quietly, gesturing to the bench across from Ron and her where Ginny and Neville had moved over for him.

Harry sat gratefully, hearing the Gryffindor quickly explode back into shouting as everyone continued their conversations.

"You look better, Harry." Hermione said without looking at him, scrawling something on a scrap of parchment beside her plate.

"You look old, mate." Ron corrected, staring at his face.

Hermione pushed the parchment across the table and turned it around with a thin finger.

STORY IS YOU CAUGHT STILLING SICKNESS THAT STUNTED  
YOUR GROWTH

Harry nodded, pushed the parchment back to her.



"Thanks." Harry said to them both.

"So, will you join us for Hogsmeade Sunday?" Ron asked. "Ginny, Neville, Luna, and Seamus were going to join us for a last butterbeer before Christmas break."

"Sure." Harry agreed immediately, seeing the test in his words. Ron and Hermione grinned at him brightly and returned to their plates. Harry filled his own up with chicken and started eating happily.

"Exploding Snap tonight?" Ron offered, looking up from his food hopefully. Harry felt himself wince.

"Sorry, Madam Pomfrey's got a deathgrip on my schedule." Harry said, relieved to see Ron shrug acceptingly and return to ripping meat from his chickenbone.

Harry made sure Ron and Hermione were both finished eating before he knocked on the table and stood up.

"Sorry guys, Madam Pomfrey." Harry said, not wanting them to join him on his walk.

"You alright, Harry?" Hermione asked, her tone putting an importance in the question that Harry couldn't quite decipher.

"I'm doing better." Harry said, pretending 'doing better' meant anything at all. His health was improving, that was true, he hadn't lied, but what was 'doing better' when he was preparing for war? He was under orders to do nothing with his time, and so he could spend it eating with them, but that didn't mean he was suddenly mentally returned to being a Hogwarts student dawdling over dinner again. Harry wondered if they were ever going to get that.

"Good." Hermione answered, nodding once. Harry nodded back at

her, hiding his confusion, and left, causing whispers as he left.

Harry automatically started walking toward the lake when he left the castle's front door, guessing no one would be near the cold water in early December.

Being outside felt strange, he noted as he neared the lake's shore. He could feel wind in his hair for the first time in months, except for when he left the window open at Privet Drive. The air was cold and cut at his face and hands, drying out his nose and making his eyes sting. The grass by the edge of the lake crunched under his feet, convincing Harry that he needed to buy a pair of boots before the ground became muddier.

He had nothing to do, Harry considered, looking over the lake and seeing deer leaning its long neck down down to drink on the other side. He was supposed to spend the rest of the day doing nothing with his mind. Harry shook his head, and squatted on the ground to rest while he watched a few more deer make their way forward from the herd to approach the water.

He wanted to get to Henti's village, Harry decided suddenly. He wanted to see what happened to it, if it was even on the map anymore, and see if that little girl's house had survived the carnage. Harry found himself hoping that it hadn't. It would be grotesque to have that house standing, its painted walls and carpets intact, the television maybe still on and the muggle picture albums left around.

He'd used to know where that village was, Harry remembered. It was one of those sickening pieces of information that he'd simply known, straight from Voldemort's mind, but Harry'd lost it now. The name of that town hadn't mattered at all before. But now he had to find a way there, and he didn't even know enough to ask for muggle directions there, forget travelling by any magical means.

Harry sighed, pushing a hand through his clean hair and watching as

the deer across the lake suddenly decided to scatter away.

"Oh hi, Harry." Came Luna's voice from behind him.

Harry turned around.

"Hey Luna." He said.

Luna was wearing a polka-dot dress over black pants and what looked like a toga. Her hair was pulled up into two pigtails sticking like horns from either side of the muggle birthday-hat she had on her head.

Harry felt his eyes widen and tried not to react when he saw the large bucket of what looked-and smelled- like blood dangling from her hand.

"Why are you carrying that?" Harry tried to say casually. Luna did tend to have reasons most of the time.

"The thestrals got a new pack-mate. I'm going to throw them a party." Luna answered, using her other hand to pull a noise-maker out of a pocket of her dress and blowing into it. The resulting honk echoed almost eerily over the lake.

"Right." Harry said.

"Come join us!" Luna invited happily, lifting up the bucket of blood like an invitation. Harry watched the liquid slop against the side of the bucket and backed up.

"How do you know where the thestrals are?" Harry asked, looking over the long mouth of the Forbidden Forest that stretched over to the Quidditch fields.

"I don't silly, they'll find us." Luna said, turning swiftly and only just

missing hitting Harry with the full bucket.

"They're deep in the forest, Luna. They probably won't smell this." Harry guessed, matching her stride.

"Of course they will." Luna answered before she started to hum something Harry didn't recognize.

I'll just go on a walk with Luna and a bucket of blood, Harry thought, wishing he could go back to his studying without risking his health.

Luna was right, Harry discovered almost immediately when he saw two thestrals make their way out of the forest slowly. More followed slowly, coming out of the woods and gathering with the rest of the herd. There were twelve of them, Harry counted, though it looked like a lot more when the huge bloodless creatures stretched their wings out slightly and gathered together, staring at him and Luna. They were beautiful in their own, horrific way. They looked like they were carved from that thin glass-like ice he associated with dangerous magic. They were emaciated, but somehow they weren't creepy like he'd originally thought when he'd seen them years before. They had exactly what they needed to live and wanted nothing more. They were exquisite.

Suddenly the pack was reacting, becoming instantly protective, stretching out their wings and started to buck, baring teeth and making a terrible humming, growling noise that sounded like an angry version of the hum Luna was making seconds before. A last thestral was poking its nose out of the trees, Harry saw, looking through their wings.

"That's the new one!" Luna whispered excitedly, pointing at the thestral still making its way forward from the forest. The other thestrals settled slowly, their warning announced, and many of them turned to watch the one adult making its way forward.

Harry gasped suddenly, realizing what he was missing, when the thestral turned slightly and revealed its flank and the tiny, baby thestral hiding beside it. The baby looked like the size of any other foal, except as skinny as the rest of its species.

"Her name's going to be Brrr RRAt." Luna announced, making a growling, yapping sound.

Harry watched in surprise as the other thestrals looked up.

"BrrrrRat BrrrRat!" The baby thestral called in a high-pitched growl as it trotted toward them, looking almost like a gazelle with its happy, bouncing gait. The older thestral kept pace with BrrrRat walking easily forward until the baby thestral stopped at the front of the thestral pack, staring straight at Harry.

"BrrrrRat!" The baby yipped again.

"You named it Brat?" Harry asked, turning to Luna.

"No, silly, you growl the first part. Brrrr Rrat!" Luna tried again, showing her teeth as she growled at him. "In any case, you want to take that one." Luna said, pointing at a small adult by the side of the pack.

"He's the best at finding things. He'll find a house in Siberia when you ask him to." Luna said, sounding almost proud.

"Right." Harry said, confused. "Why would I want to find a house in Siberia?" Harry asked, almost shivering at the thought.

"You don't, silly, but if you're going to get to Barnton and back before the rain, you'll want to take that one." Luna said as she walked forward and plopped the bucket down on the cold grass. "There you go, happy belated birthday!" Luna called, waving to the baby thestral and stepping back to Harry.

Barnton, that was the town name!, it was Barnton, Northwich.

"Luna, how-" Harry started, staring at the girl. "You show up just when I'm thinking about getting to that village, you know how to get there, and you know where I'm going?" He asked, beginning to feel frightened.

Was she beside my cot when I was gasping out everything I knew of Henti's town? How could she have been there?

"You'll be there with Mrowerl in twenty minutes, don't worry Harry." Luna repeated, watching as the mother thestral drank from the bucket.

Harry nodded, deciding to ask Luna about it a different day. Sometimes he wondered if she knew everything, if only by being weird enough that everyone forgot where she was. For now, he was supposed to be back in the infirmary in less than an hour.

Harry bared his teeth at the thestral Luna had pointed to, and growled, making sure the animal saw his aggression before he bowed his head. He kept his eyes up to match the thestral's gaze, doing his best not to give the predator an open chance to attack him. He had to show strength first, and then deference, to win a predator's respect; they'd never interact as equals with anything that looked or smelled like prey.

The thestral blinked slowly, and approached him from the pack, its thin skin flaring slightly against the bone of its nose. The thestral opened its mouth slightly, releasing a soft humming growl, before stretching its neck out to rub its bony head against his chest. Harry put a hand on the predator's neck and grinned gratefully. Its body even felt like it was carved out of ice or thin stone, unyielding and rough, like there was almost nothing between his hand and the animal's hard bone. Thestrals didn't need thick muscles to move,

Harry remembered. Almost all of their movement was pushed by magic. It was why thestrals were almost exactly as fast as they wanted to be in a given movement.

This creature could rip him to shreds in an instant, Harry thought as the single thestral made its way forward. He could kill the entire thestral pack but they could kill him too, Harry considered, liking the thought. These were not soft, overly-proud bird-like creatures, these were living skeletons that fought and killed whatever they needed to protect their own. God he loved these creatures, Harry thought, running his hands down the thestrals whither until he had both of his hands over the animals back.

Woah.

He felt magic in them like a thread woven into their bloodstream, intricate and exact, a force that did exactly what it needed to for them, and nothing else. There was something beautiful in that. Touching their magic Harry felt more about their makeup than he'd ever understood in Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures. They were made of flesh, bone, and magic, and little else.

Even their fabled sense of direction was magical, Harry realized, sinking his concentration into feeling his magic react to the thestral's in front of him. He was beginning to think their sense of direction was far greater than he'd been told. Harry wondered if they even needed to know what their riders were looking for, in order to find it, their 'searching' magic was so strong.

And suddenly Harry had to wonder if it were even possible to kill the semi-invisible creatures, or if Hagrid had forgotten to mention that they were in the presence of immortals every time they climbed onto the Hogwarts carriages. Thestrals were so defined by their magic, Harry had to wonder if their flesh would age and die like a horse's would, or if they were actually closer to being unicorns.

Harry pulled his hand down the thestrals neck, feeling the ridges of thin bones beneath his hand, and thinking about a creature that had no fat because it only needed magic to live. Flesh, bones, and magic. Harry drew his hand through the thestral's sparse mane, feeling almost happy for a moment, like he had to be wrong about the world, like there couldn't be a war going on when something so beautiful existed in the world.

Then the thestral twisted its neck around to look at him through a single baleful eye and growl. Harry felt the flick of the thestral's tale hitting against his back and pushed himself up on the back of the thestral, surprised when his elbows started to shake with the effort. He wasn't healed yet, Harry remembered, letting his body lean forward and fall onto the back of the animal.

"Barnton?" Harry said as he straightened himself up and found a place behind the animal's sharp withers for his legs to press and hold him on as the thestral started to move, automatically pointing itself south.

The last time he'd been on a thestral he'd been going with friends to watch Sirius die, Harry remembered, just before the thestral started to run.

Shite, thestrals are fast, Harry thought, gripping on with his legs and grabbing fistfuls of the thin, wispy mane bouncing in front of him.

Harry heard Luna laughing, a light, happy sound, as the thestral stormed forward. He leaned forward and saw the trees start to blur beside him as the thestral sped up and struggled to breathe out against the wind pushing inside his throat.

Harry scrunched up his legs to make room for the thestral's wings as the thestral pulled the huge membrane forward and down. Harry's stomach lurched upward as with the single movement the thestral pulled up into the air, releasing an accomplished screech as it lifted



above the trees. Harry released a laugh, just before hearing a pounding below him. Harry sat up slightly, gripping the thestral's flank with his legs and looked back, to see three more thestrals taking off. Harry watched, fascinated as the other three spread out behind him, humming and yipping, before he faced back into the sunset and leaned into the thestral's flight.

"As fast as we can." Harry whispered, pushing his face almost into the thestral's hair. The thestral hummed in response, and sped up again, until Harry couldn't breathe unless he kept his head tucked away from the wind. Harry grinned, glad to be moving quickly again, even if he wasn't going anywhere that would help in the war.

Harry knew immediately when he saw Barnton, and leaned back, quietly asking the thestral to slow. The thestral obeyed and Harry looked over the thestral's large, almost-transparent wings to squint through the dusk at what was left of the town below.

Everything was black, Harry saw, making out half-burnt trees and broken ruins below. The black stretched on for what looked like miles, leaving street after street flattened and scorched. The whole area looked like it had been smashed in a single explosion, leaving nothing but a giant expanse of dark charcoal and black pavement surrounded by untouched farmland and trees.

He hadn't known how far the suburbia stretched, Harry remembered. He'd been on the street level in Voldemort's mind, seeing only the first line of streets and screaming. It was so much larger than he'd thought, Harry mourned, looking at the black expanding almost to the horizon as the thestral circled over the space, gliding downward.

How many died here? Harry wondered, watching the ruins shape themselves into the patterns of homes and lines for shopping malls as the land got closer.

The thestral landed with barely a bump, its hooves squishing into the

grass at the border of the town. Harry slid off its back, rubbing its spine gratefully as he stared at what was left of the town and watched ash swirl out of it, looking like smoke carried by the wind.

Harry drew a hand down the thestrals neck as he walked forward, glad to feel the animal staying back as he started toward the ruined homes.

Harry stayed silent as he approached the town, feeling like even a sigh would be disrespectful. The village was silent, almost perfectly so, and Harry found himself grateful that he'd come at night; he didn't want to see the village lit up or hear the birds calling to each other from nests within the ruins.

Harry winced as his shoe crunched against the black char blown into the grass.

The ash smelled terrible, bitter and throat-clogging, reminiscent of the time Dudley had kicked in his television and Vernon had tried to set it on fire with the leaves and trash in the yard.

Harry wished he could stop breathing, but couldn't cast a bubble spell in the town. People had died here, the least he could do was honor it unflinchingly.

How am I going to find Henti's home? Harry questioned, looking over the street as he finally stepped over the pavement's tall curb. He tried not to wonder how he'd even recognize that house beneath the char when he'd never even seen the inside. He didn't know when he'd decided to look for it either, or even why, but he felt a need to see that one house again, and he wasn't going to start thinking too much about his emotions here.

The streets were lined with blacked brick homes left gutted with holes where doors and windows were supposed to be. Harry felt his eyes start to sting at the ash in the air and carefully started breathing

through his nose, knowing he couldn't escape the smell of ash and scared to start tasting it.

Harry began making his way down the first street, trying not to cough. By the second street in he started seeing things laying unburnt in the street, laptops and photo albums and baby strollers scattered as thoughtlessly as litter on a highway. The Muggles had tried to protect their possessions from the fires, Harry remembered, staring at a hot-pink hairbrush sticking out of the gray. The color looked too out of place, Harry grimaced, purposely looking away.

The area had already been cleaned up to look like a tragic but purely muggle event, Harry understood as he walked through an intersection where bodies had been piled. The intersection was the only thing the Death Eaters had been careful not to burn, and yet now it was as damaged as everything around it.

Harry looked down the two ruined streets, wondering quietly where the graveyard was, though he decided as soon as he thought it that he didn't want to visit Henti's stone. It would seem unfair somehow, after he'd only seen her die, to stand by her grave like a family member. She was cute and screamed for, that was the only reason he remembered her over the hundreds of other children that died here, Harry reminded himself harshly, pulling himself out of the memory and picking a random direction to walk.

Harry only got four steps down the street before he caught of glimpse of white sticking out of the ash piled on the pavement and stepped towards it, thinking he was seeing skin.

He wondered at how twisted he'd become, that he'd stepped forward emotionlessly to see a body but wanted to run away and cry at what he actually found.

There was a tiny white My Little Pony laying with its leg sticking up out of the wreckage.

Harry kneeled and pushed a hand beneath the ash, gathering the intact little doll in his hands before brushing its sides off and gently pulled bits of charred home out of its tail.

The pony was smudged gray in places and still filthy but Harry clutched it between his hands as carefully as he could, staying crouched in the ash as he stared at the ruined wall in front of him until he noticed that he was finished whatever he'd come to do.

Harry walked back out of the village, feeling his legs start to protest the long ride and walk as he approached the thestrals.

Harry struggled to mount the thestral without damaging the hollow plastic doll clutched in his hand, and gained an annoyed growl from the creature. Harry collapsed onto its back, panting in its thin hair as he struggled to straighten himself out.

"Alright." Harry sighed, leaning forward and tucking his head down, only then noticing that the sun had set fully and hoping the wind wouldn't damage the doll during the short flight back to the school.

Harry landed back at Hogwarts, shivering from the high night air. He slid off the thestral's back as the other three landed and quickly trotted back into the forest. Harry pressed his forehead into 'his' thestral's flank, gasping for breath and fighting back tears. He'd been fine for the entire trip, and yet somehow being on the dew-crisped grass in front of Hogwarts again was cutting at his emotions. Harry settled himself, pulling a hand down his face and jaw and pulling at his hair.

"Thank you." Harry said, resting a hand on the thestral's hard wither and catching its strong gaze as the thestral turned its head to look at him. The thestral nodded slowly, and blinked once, before sidestepping away from him and starting forward, back into the forest to find its pack.

Harry once again wondered how much magical animals could understand of wizards, and started toward Hogwarts, needing to get back to the infirmary before two hours had passed. He'd keep the pony in his trunk, Harry decided, unsure why he wanted to keep it but feeling sick at the thought of throwing it away.

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~~HP~~

Okay, this update came up a little later than expected, thanks to Left for Dead 2 finally arriving on my front step. I had to chose between fanfiction and killing zombies, and as awesome sauce as this is being, I'm afraid zombies won out this week. Next update might take a little longer, family's home and zombies are rampaging about my city, but no worries fanfiction is still steadily eating at my social life and will continue to do so, so I'll see y'all soon!

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"Enter." Snape's voice called through the protective wards. Harry pushed the door open slowly and closed it behind himself.

"Good evening professor." Harry greeted as he walked quickly to a student desk beside the outside wall and sat leaning against the cold stone.

He'd finally rested through enough of the day, Harry thought, feeling his body relax for the first time that day as he allowed himself to open his current book, Transfiguring Ward Target Objects as a Breakthrough Methodology, and buried himself where he didn't have to think about how real the war was beginning to feel.

"And what precisely are you planning to learn with your wand in your pocket, Mr. Potter?" Snape's voice interrupted him.

"Transfigurations, professor." Harry answered blandly, glancing up at where Snape was sneering from his desk.

Does Snape think I was actually asking to learn potions or occlumency from him? Harry wondered suddenly, remembering Snape trying to teach and insult him at the same time and only ever

succeeding at the latter.

Snape didn't respond, and Harry gratefully sank himself into learning how simple transfiguration could be used to break certain protection wards, even as he acknowledged that most wards would never be so easy. But Harry wanted to learn how protection wards worked, so he'd study every manner to break them.

Harry looked up when his alarm spell on his quill made it vibrate in his hand, warning him that he needed to return to the infirmary to rest for another eleven hours.

"Thank you, professor." Harry said quietly as he stood, closing his book. He only had a few more chapters in it to finish the next day.

"Come on Wednesday as well. You evidently need more practice with this." Snape ordered. Harry turned around, looking in the man's dark eyes that didn't betray a hint of pleading.

"After break. Of course" Harry confirmed, nodding. "Good night professor,"

"Goodnight, Mr. Potter." Snape replied, for once looking up at Harry as he spoke. Harry blinked, surprised to get a response.

"See you after break, professor." He said, before leaving.

~~HP~~

Harry woke up the next morning and realized with horror that he had nothing planned for the day. He'd agreed to meet with Ron and Hermione on Sunday but he was still left with all of Saturday to fill with only half an hour to devote to studying. Which meant he had to spend his day doing more than preparing for the war, Harry thought; it was time to start fighting in it.

Harry showered in the infirmary bathroom and went about his entire morning routine taking a full ten minutes to get clean, shaved, and dressed as Pomfrey ordered. He dressed in full winter formal robes and carefully chose a warm hat, scarf, and gloves, carefully remembering all of the articles Pomfrey ordered him to wear when he went out before he slowly slipped the invisibility cloak over himself.

Harry snuck past Pomfrey's office, hardly breathing. He stepped along the infirmary walls, staying out of eyesight of the office doorway despite the invisibility cloak, praying Pomfrey wouldn't hear him. For once he needed to leave without her taking note of everything he was going to do.

Harry slipped through the ajar infirmary door, only allowing himself to breath when he was fully into the empty hallway. He started walking toward the stairway immediately, glad to see that the stairs had oriented themselves to let him out by the door closest to the forbidden forest.

He ran down and pushed the thick door open slowly, feeling his heart pounding out the stress as the cool outside air hit his face. Harry peered around the door confirming that the grounds were abandoned, careful despite having the invisibility cloak to hide him. He couldn't afford to get caught by a teacher thinking he was like any other student running away to get lost in the forest.

Harry made his way toward Hagrid's hut slowly, making sure the magical cloak stayed over his feet as he walked until he'd hidden himself properly behind the hut where Hagrid's chickens were fenced.

This is sick. Harry thought as he carefully took the thick top off of the wooden chicken's coop and saw four of the loud animals asleep with their beaks tucked down.

Did Luna do this?



Harry took out his rosewood wand and pointed it at the chicken sleeping closest to him. He didn't want to do this wandlessly. There was something intimate in wandless magic that Harry knew he didn't want to experience when it came to casting this.

"Petrificus internus." Harry whispered unnecessarily, wincing at the words that would paralyze all the involuntary movement inside a body, stopping the blood and heart and brain together. The spell's magic felt cold and still, almost like a stone against his magic.

The bird didn't even look any different, Harry noticed, staring down at the bird that stayed in its same soft position, and trying to accept that it wasn't asleep anymore.

Harry carefully wrapped his hands around the warm body and lifted it out of the coop, half-expecting the bird to wake up and start screeching.

Harry closed the coop quietly and grabbed the empty feed bucket from beside it. He glanced around what he could see of the grounds again, scanning the castle for anyone going outside, knowing he could get into serious complications if anyone caught him now. But he needed to attract the thestrals, so he needed blood. He'd make bigger sacrifices than killing a chicken, Harry reminded himself, even as he drew a hand down the soft feathers of the first animal he'd ever killed. He had to do what was necessary, Harry steeled himself.

Harry cut the neck of the chicken with a quick flick of his fingers, and held the bird by its feet over the bucket, grimacing as a small glug of blood dripped down the severed neck into the speckles of feed still stuck to the bucket's base.

Oh fuck Merlin, Harry cursed silently as he realized what he'd done. He'd killed the bird, stopping its blood from flowing, and now it wouldn't drain.

Should I magically siphon it? Harry was thinking when he heard a loudgrowl from behind him. Harry spun slowly, shifting his weight to run at any second.

Harry grinned in relief as he caught sight of a thestral half-hidden in the forest, humming at him.

"MrrOwerl" growl the thestral, it's teeth bared, though it didn't look scared or annoyed at all.

"Hey MrrOwerl." Harry called softly, relieved as he walked forward toward the thestral, holding his hand out between them as he approached.

Harry felt his face stretch into a full smile when the large creature stepped forward and pushed its dragon-like nose and jaw into his hand.

"Can you find people?" Harry asked, praying the creature could understand him, and more that it could help him.

In an instant the thestral had leaned down and snatched the chicken out of his hand. The thestral rested an eye on Harry for a moment, before throwing its neck up and over and sending the dead bird flying out of sight in the forest.

Harry heard the buzzing sound of more thestrals answering from somewhere out of sight, followed by a single distinctive crunch of bone.

Harry turned back to MrrOwerl, watching in amazement as the thestral bared its teeth at him slightly and presented him with its side, catching his gaze with an impatient look.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief and pushed himself onto its back,

praying it would answer his next question as easily.

"Can you find Arsenius Jugson?" Harry asked.

~~HP~~

The house looked so normal, Harry grimaced as he dropped off of the thestral's back, carefully keeping his invisibility cloak draped over himself as he landed on the yard outside the protective wards of a small, motionless brick farmhouse.

Harry felt at the protective wards and knew immediately that he couldn't get through them. He recognized each of them, but if he tried to brute strength push his magic through them, he'd doubtlessly end up in a duel against Jugson and every other fighter in the house. He couldn't afford that, Harry knew, he was supposed to get back to the infirmary in one piece, mediwitch's orders.

Harry knelt on the grass, leaning lightly the thestral's leg as he prepared for a long wait.

There was no way it would be so easy, Harry winced as Jugson came storming out of his house toward them. Harry recognized the face immediately, and felt his wand drop easily into his hand as memories swarmed up.

I'm for the silent crying type, Harry remembered, suddenly needing to puke. Harry forced his stomach back down soundlessly, and stood up, facing the man in person as he'd wanted to so badly.

"Thestral! Get, you bastard! Get out of here!" Jugson shouted at he approached, waving a hand at them. "Creepy fucking creatures." The man muttered, staring at Mrowerl.

He's still inside the wards, Harry noticed, backing up away from the protective line.

Mrowerl backed up with him, baring his sharp teeth and beginning to bucking up slightly, growling at the disgusting man. Harry drew a hand down the thestral's back, silently asking it to settle down as they backed up.

I need the man to take two more steps forward, Harry considered, glancing around the area for anything that would help him. He was ten steps away from a wooden fence separating the house from the fields beyond, Harry saw, but he couldn't think of any way to use that. He could break it, but that would put Jugson on guard that there was more than a single thestral in front of him.

Mrowerl let out a particularly nasty growl, capturing Harry's attention. Harry looked back and lifted his hand away from the creature, unsure what it was going to do. The thestral was obviously preparing to charge, staring forward and growling at Jugson more fiercely than Harry had ever heard an animal do.

"What the fuck?" The man sneered, pulling out his wand. "Alright, ugly horsey, we'll eat pony tonight." The man said, releasing his wide, excited smile.

"Avada Kedavra." The man said, almost lightly.

Avada Kedavra on an animal? Harry thought, jumping up and trying to pull the thestral away. Green flashed in his eyes, almost blinding him, and Harry backed up quickly until he felt the fence cutting into his back, closing his eyes so as not to watch the beautiful creature collapse to the ground.

Shite.

"What the fuck!" Jugson shouted, and Harry opened his eyes back on the thestral, to see the animal very much alive, it's eyes glowing green, the exact color of the killing curse.

Holy hell, Harry thought, watching the striking green eyes fade to their usual perfect black.

Apparently I'm not the only thing Avada Kedavra didn't kill, Harry thought, wishing he could stop what he was doing and get to the Knockturn Alley library as quickly as possible. He had new questions to answer. Why couldn't Avada Kedavra kill thestrals? Why did it focus in its eyes? How did the Avada Kedavra spell work, how did it kill?

I can't stop what I'm doing, Harry told himself fiercely, settling his eyes and thoughts back on the rapist in front of him.

Jugson was staring at the thestral, keeping his wand pointed at the animal despite it was shaking terribly in his hand.

To Harry's surprise, Jugson stepped forward rather than back, the fear in his eyes quickly sharpening into an intense glare.

"You're gunna regret that, cunt." Jugson grinned wildly, pulling his lips back to reveal a line of even, white teeth.

Jugson started the wandmotion for Crucio, his eyes almost flashing as he grinned with excitement and took another, single step forward.

He hit the ground with a soft thump, the smile still stretching his face as he fell, the feeling of his internal magic replaced with the familiar magic of still, cold, stone.

"Petrificus internus." Harry whispered unnecessarily.

I'm not sure what to think about this, Harry thought, staring at the corpse as he blindly reached a hand out to grab for the fence behind him. Jugson wasn't a force in his magic anymore; Harry couldn't feel anything from the body in front of it and he didn't have to check it; the

man was dead.

It was so easy, Harry thought, turning his back on the body behind him to lean on the fence, watching a bird pecking at dirt in the clean field. He was supposed to feel something, Harry knew. Remorse and fear and nausea. But he hadn't felt it after Quirrell in first year, and he didn't feel it now. It was necessary, and that was all there was to it.

It was necessary, Harry reminded himself. It was murder, of a sort, he knew that, but he'd decided to do anything to fight against the Death Eaters. He'd always known that fighting in the war would entail fighting in it, killing for it, and Harry couldn't pretend to be upset that Arsenius Jugson was dead.

This is why they say anything's fair in war, Harry thought, surprised at the sudden clarity of the quote. This was a war, and one that had to be one. That justified the means and simplified everything. Jugson had needed to die, and so he did. Harry had the strength then to kill him, and so he did so. It was simple, and the word 'fair' didn't hold any meaning beside the truth that Jugson had to die.

Harry felt a soft breeze ruffle his hair from behind and took a deep breath, only to get the very obvious smell of human excrement burning his nose. Harry coughed and shook his head, trying to breathe only through his mouth until the breeze passed. Jugson's bowels had released, he understood. Corpses were not clean.

It was necessary, Harry told himself, feeling his entire body relax with the thought. He'd decided to become whatever his side in the war needed him to be, because he needed his side to win. The Death Eater campaign was gaining members faster now, quickly gathering support across the nation, and killing as they went. Harry remembered Dumbledore saying that people thought that being a Death Eater was the safer route to take in the war, and their support allowed men like Arsenius Jugson to hang children up in trees. That needed to change, Arsenius Jugson needed to die, and the Death

Eaters had to start getting scared.

-which meant leaving more than forgotten unmarked bodies, Harry realized, running a hand over his face and glancing back at the corpse cooling behind him. He needed a pattern, a warning that everyone would notice, something that would tell the Death Eaters that someone was going to make them stop, make the raids stop, and kill anyone who even approached Arsenius Jugson's crimes.

Then, Harry realized, examining his thoughts and releasing a shuddering breath that steamed up the cold air. He already knew that he was going to do this again, that more Death Eaters needed to die, and that he still had the strength to do it, which meant the duty to do it. The same equation still existed and he still needed to follow it, to do anything that needed to be done, until the war was over, or one way or another, he was stopped.

And he needed to mark the bodies.

Harry pulled a dead splinter from the fence wood in front of him and stared at it, concentrating on transfiguring the material to mirror the image in his head, until he was holding a perfect fat My Little Pony, with a white body and a pink mane, a clean version of the little doll Henti gripped so protectively when she was alive.

Let them be as horrified by this as I am, Harry thought, petting the doll's mane before he turned around.

Harry held his breath and walked between the thestral and the corpse, leaning over as he carefully left the doll beside Jugson's head.

He didn't have to mourn any loss, Harry realized as he stood up. He was finally doing what was necessary, finally fighting to win the war, and he'd already decided to sacrifice his soul and his happiness and his morals and everything else that he had. All that was left was

seeing what that would entail, and if it would work.

He remembered, flying back, that he'd needed to get boots. Harry thought about it briefly and realized he still had the time to leave Mrowerl outside Hosmeade, walk to the town store and return to Hogwarts.

I just killed a man, Harry reminded himself, unsure whether he wanted to be the type of man who would kill someone and then calmly go shopping.

The other option is to not go, simply to say that I didn't go, Harry figured.

"Hogsmeade?" Harry called to the thestral, smiling as he felt the animal immediately turn slightly.

There was no way to deny that thestrals could understand wizards, Harry thought, pulling his fingers through the animal's mane. Even fully animal magical creatures could speak and understand. It was a strange thought, Harry considered, thinking back to the days when he lived in Privet Drive and knew nothing of the magical world.

The magical world hadn't brought him the perfect life, like he'd thought. Being famous wasn't glorious fun like it was supposed to be, it turned out stressful and harsh and strained his friendships terribly. Magic was hard to learn when he was young, he'd had to study it, and couldn't do much. And now that magic could do almost anything he needed it to, he was doing what was necessary, and was already feeling jaded enough to barely even care. The magical world had pulled him into a war, and he had to wonder what he would become by the time it let him go.

Enough of that Harry thought, landing outside the Shrieking Shack and pulling his mind out of the nostalgia. He was what he was, and he was doing what he needed to. At the moment he needed boots.



Harry walked into the woods and felt out with his magic to make sure no one was in the area before he stripped off the invisibility cloak and folded it over an arm.

Hiding in plain sight, Harry thought, guessing no one would suspect he was carrying something so expensive so openly, especially not when simply walking to Gladrag's Wizardwear.

Harry stepped inside, glad to enter the warm shop.

"Excuse me, Mr. Gladrag?" Harry called, glancing around the disorganized clothing racks and overstuffed shelves for the tall, skinny wizard he'd met two years before when he'd come in to buy socks for Dobby.

"Coming, coming!" The man's voice called, just before the man appeared in the doorway leading to the backroom.

"Do you sell boots, sir?" Harry asked.

"We do, and for a pair of them I'd offer you a deal for a professional wash for only 5 galleons." Gladrag replied, nodding pointedly at Harry's robes as he walked forward, rubbing his hands off on a rag.

Harry looked down and blinked at the mud he saw caking his robes from the knee down.

I kneeled to wait outside that brick home, Harry remembered, carefully not flushing at the thought.

"Your professional wash is always only 5 galleons, sir, but I'll take the deal." Harry replied, remembering the advertisement on the window he'd seen as he'd entered.

"Very good then," Gladrag replied, turning and throwing his rag onto

a random shelf behind the cluttered payment counter. "So what kind of boots can I help you for?" He asked, still facing away from Harry as he pulled a stool from beneath the counter and sat on it.

"Anything that would look good and keep my feet out of the snow." Harry replied easily.

"We've got nothing but women's shoes in the back. Do you want to try some of them, wait until tomorrow when we get a new order in or get them custom?" The man asked, now retying the laces on one of his brown shoes.

Does this man ever stop to talk? Harry wondered, watching in fascination as the man started unknotting the laces of the other shoe.

"Which would be fastest?" Harry asked.

"The women's shoes, if they fit ya, but if not, I'd say custom would get here around the same time as the new order, and our custom boots have a 100 percent chance of fitting you, a guarantee you won't find anywhere else, and they will be sent to your front door with no hassle at all." Gladrag replied, sounding like a television commercial even as he finished carefully knotting up his shoe.

"I'll go with the custom then," Harry answered, smiling at the man's dry answer.

"Custom boots and a professional wash, very good then." Gladrag replied, getting up and beginning to search through the clutter.

"Accio measuring tape!" Gladrag ordered finally, pointing his wand at the pile and catching the long tape as it came flying out.

Harry smiled and looked around for a place to sit, preparing to wait while the fretful man measured him.

He was feeling better, Harry realized as Gladrag handed him the stool. He'd killed a man who needed to die, and it was done. There didn't need to be more to it than that.

~~HP~~

Hello all! I'm back, zombies are dead and chapter is written. Yay!

~~HP~~

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"Harry! You're here!" Hermione's voice called happily when Harry walked into the dim Three Broomsticks. Harry looked around and saw her sitting with Ron, Ginny, Seamus and Neville at a table by the fireplace.

"I told you he would come." Ginny growled, elbowing Ron as Harry summoned a chair for himself and sat down.

Harry carefully rose wandless silencing wards around them. He didn't know if the Gryffindors had anything to say that he didn't want heard, but he figured, if nothing else, casting silencing spells was a good habit to start.

"Wow, nice casting Harry!" Hermione said suddenly, grinning at him.

How the hell?

Harry looked at her in confusion for a moment before he glanced down at the cushioned, armed chair he'd created.

Oh.

"Thanks." Harry answered casually.

"We ordered you a butterbeer." Ginny said, pushing the drink across the table noisily. She caught his eye as she passed it and glanced pointedly at Ron, who was staring moodily at the table.

"Again, thanks." Harry said as he grabbed the open butterbeer and turned in his seat to face Ron more fully.

I thought we were cool again. Harry thought, glancing over Ron's sullen posture and set jaw.

"Hey, Ron, what's up with you?" Harry asked.

Ron jerked his head up to look at him before pointedly glaring at the bottle of butterbeer in his hand. The entire table went quiet and awkward, staring at him.

"So Harry, what's your plan for holiday break? Got anything interesting planned?" Seamus asked loudly

"Madam Pomfrey said I was healthy enough to study up to five hours a day, as long as I take breaks, so I'll be doing that at least." Harry answered, trying to avoid having to say whether or not he was still invited over to the Weasley's.

Ron snorted, gaining everyone's attention again, before sipping sullenly at his butterbeer. Harry struggled not to roll his eyes, and turned back to Seamus.

"What about you?" Harry asked.

"Oh well I've got to get home, don't I? Everyone's choosing sides nowadays, and my mum's gunna want me with her." Seamus answered. "She's not going to want to be alone with Da' at all."

"Oh, your father's a muggle, isn't he?" Hermione asked.

"Yeah, bit of a nasty worry for my Mum right now." Seamus answered. Hermione nodded her understanding, and Harry felt the conversation die.

Harry sipped from his butterbeer, wishing Ron would speak up about his obvious anger and get over it. Harry had to spend time with his

friends right then, but he knew he was getting healthy quickly now, and such orders were going to stop. After that, he'd have to plunge into the war almost as fully as he had before. Care for his health didn't necessarily translate to care for his friends, and Harry wasn't sure when he'd spend much time innocently sharing butterbeers with them again.

"Bah!," Ginny scoffed after a few seconds. "This is stupid. He's angry at you because you've been gone so much this year." She said, gesturing to Ron. Ron looked up from the table slowly and glared at his sister.

"But we already talked about that." Harry said, blinking at Ron.

"And apparently he has suddenly decided to change his mind and not be over it yet. As I said, stupid." Ginny summarized, glaring back at Ron.

Ron slammed his bottle down on the table, making Ginny, Seamus and Hermione jump.

"I didn't expect you to show up today at all, I hate that Harry. You're supposed to be my friend." Ron growled, ignoring the splashed butterbeer dripping down his hand.

"I did show up today, Ron." Harry replied.

"Because Pomfrey told you you were supposed to, right?" Ron sneered.

"Partly because of that, yes." Harry answered honestly.

"I'm just frustrated! You're supposed to want to be here with us, but instead you come like you're doing a chore for the bloody Hogwarts mediwitch!" Ron said, glaring at him.

"I told you at the beginning of the year, Ron, I'm trying to fight in an actual war, do you have any idea what that means?" Harry asked desperately, hating that he had to say all of this again.

"Yeah, you're gonna become a murderer, I got that the first time around." Ron growled. Harry felt his face flush against his will.

"Ron!" Hermione scoffed, whipping her head around to glare at him.

"I'm going to become whatever I need to be, Ron." Harry answered quietly.

"What, even if that means not being my friend?" Ron snarled.

Merlin, don't ask that.

"We need to win this war, Ron." Harry replied meaninglessly.

"Answer the question, Harry." Ron growled back, leaning forward to glare into his eyes.

"Ron-" Hermione started.

"No, let him answer the damn question. Which is more important to you, fighting with the bloody Order or being my friend?" Ron demanded.

"We need to win this war, Ron. Think about what the Death Eaters are doing-" Harry started.

"Just answer the fucking question, Harry. It's not too bloody complicated."

"The war, Ron. The war has to be-" Harry started, looking at Ron's reddening face sadly.

"Then go fight in it!" Ron yelled, pushing his chair back as he stood up. The chair flipped off balance and cracked against the floor loudly.

"Ron, you're acting-" Hermione started.

"Go fucking fight in your bloody war, okay Harry. Your fucking choice, your choice!" Ron shouted. Harry glanced around the bar, glad to see most people still ignoring them, unaware of the shouting beyond the silencing wards.

"Right." Harry said, standing up.

"Harry-" Hermione tried again.

"No, Hermione, really, it's okay. The truth is I don't make a very good friend. It's his choice whether or not that is good enough." Harry said as he miniaturized his chair and pulled it into his coat pocket.

Harry bundled himself up quickly, pulling on his coat and carefully wrapping his scarf around his neck before he glanced back at the table and found Neville swiftly doing the same.

"You're coming home for Christmas though, right?" Ginny asked, looking worried.

'Home', that's sweet Ginny. I suppose that means I'm still invited. It is Mrs. Weasley's house, after all. Harry considered, glancing at Ron.

Ron was sneering, and still red, but at Harry's glance his expression flashed into one of worry for a moment, and he nodded.

"Of course." Harry replied with a casual smile, only then remembering Pomfrey's orders that would have forced him to go. "See you all."

"See you later." Hermione replied, wincing.



"I'll be seeing ya, Harry." Seamus called out.

Harry left, Neville following him out silently.

"Short visit." Neville said as soon as they'd stepped back into the cold. It had started to snow, Harry noticed, holding a hand out to catch a few of the cold flakes.

"Indeed, but he'll grow up." Harry replied, starting off down the path that would lead them back to Hogwarts.

"We going back to the castle then?" Neville asked, falling into step beside him.

"I am, yeah. Why did you follow me out?" Harry asked, glancing at the other Gryffindor.

Neville looked older than Harry remembered him. He stood taller and had a set, determined look about his expression that Harry barely recognized.

"You were right." Neville shrugged. "You're right a lot, Harry."

What does that mean?

"What does that mean?" Harry asked aloud, blinking at the confusing boy.

"Let me think." Neville ordered, and went silent. Harry nodded and continued walking.

Harry had almost made it to the outer gates of the village, and was wondering if Neville had lost his train of thought entirely, when Neville finally looked up from the ground in front of him, and nodded.

"Okay, remember last year, when Umbridge was running rampant and destroying Defense against the Dark Arts? You stood up in the Hogs' Head and told us that you thought we had to take matters into our own hands." Neville recounted, before going silent for another few seconds.

"That's what this war is going to come down to, I think. We've gotta do that, gotta stand up and fight like our parents did. We might die but we'll die either way, and I'd rather get killed or..or..tortured, than die because I was studying for the N.E.W.T.s and ignoring everything."

"And you, Harry... I'm not nervous with you, I'm not stupid with you. Snape or Dumbledore tell me to do something and I trip over my own feet, and it sounds terrible but I don't even know if I can trust them. I know you, Harry. If you were to tell me to trust Snape, I'd do it. You trust Dumbledore, so I'll follow him, but I'm following you into this war, Harry. I decided that last year." Neville said.

"I brought you into a terrible battle last year, Neville." Harry said quietly. "I was an idiot and could have gotten you killed."

"I followed you without hesitation, and I'll do the exact same thing again." Neville answered simply, a determined strength to his voice that made Harry instantly respect his answer, no matter how foolish it could have sounded.

"I'll be smarter next time." Harry promised, before casting a silencing spell over them. "I'm going to join the Order, hopefully this Christmas. Learn about what's being done, what more needs to be done, and start doing some of it."

"Owl me if you need to. I may even be visiting the Burrow briefly after Christmas." Neville replied with a nod. "If you want to sit with me on the train back, Luna and I would like the company." He offered.

To escape Ron, in other words.

"Thanks, but I should try again to make up things with Ron. I'll sit, he'll sulk, Hermione, Ginny, and I will carry an awkward conversation." Harry replied.

Neville snorted, and shook his head.

"Luna and you, though?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow. Neville's immediate blush answered his question and Harry laughed.

"Yeah." Neville said. "She's actually pretty awesome. Weird, but awesome somehow. She'll randomly talk about the rain when it's perfectly nice out, but you know, as odd as that is, I've learned to grab an umbrella. I feel silly in a sunny, clear day, carrying it, but heck, it's happened twice, and trust me, she says it's gunna rain, and it'll start to rain. Makes me wonder if Blibbering Humdingers are actually trying to steal my fingernails."

"I doubt it." Harry replied, smiling at how Neville was beaming as he spoke about the strange girl.

"Yeah, there is that." Neville replied with a laugh, letting his hair flop back and forth as he shook his head. "I'm gunna go to the gardens, Professor Sprout has given me access to the Class 2 greenhouses. I'd have to get you permission, but you're welcome to join me if you'd like." He offered.

"No thanks, but I'll see you at the Christmas feast tonight." Harry replied, heading toward the castle while Neville turned off onto a side path away from him.

"See ya, Harry. Sorry about Ron." Neville replied.

"I'll handle it. See you later." Harry called back.

~~HP~~

"Harry dear!" Molly Weasley called excitedly as Harry entered the kitchen after he'd side-along apparated from Hogsmeade with Fred. In a second Harry found himself swallowed up in a giant hug.

"Hello, Mrs. Weasley, thanks for having me." Harry said into her shoulder, smiling at how relaxed he'd felt as soon as he'd stepped into her home.

"My god, he's alive?!" George shouted as he ran into the kitchen.

"Oh dearie me, I thought he was a goner, but I showed up at Hogsmeade, and bless his heart, alive he stood!" Fred cried back.

"Oh no wonder Mum's in a tizzy; alive, alive, he is alive at last!" George cried back, clasping his hands in front of his face, gazing adoringly at Harry.

"At last? How long was he dead?" Ginny asked from where she sat at the kitchen table.

"According to Ronnikins, he was simply dead to the world for months." Fred answered, walking around the countertop to snatch a piece of cheese from the cooking ingredients his mother had left unprotected.

Oh, that's what they're talking about; Ron being angry again.

"Months, I tell you, months! Oh, Ron suffered, he did!" Fred was carrying on .

"Oh quiet, both of you." Mrs. Weasley ordered, slapping Fred's hand as he reached for another slice of the cheese.

"Where is dear Ronnikins?" George asked, jumping up to sit on the

kitchen table beside Ginny.

"Upstairs, sulking." Ginny replied with a shrug.

"After I kindly brought him home from school? How rude." George replied.

"He'll come around. Now get out, all of you, unless you want to be enlisted to help cook." Mrs. Weasley.

"Retreat! Retreat!" Fred yelled, snatching a last piece of cheese as he ran out toward the back door.

"Come on, Harry, let's go play Quidditch." George offered, following after Fred.

"I'll help you in the kitchen, Mrs. Weasley." Harry offered, hoping to escape the noise. He wasn't used to it anymore, Harry figured, looking through the open door to where Fred and George were already leaping onto brooms despite the light snow on the ground.

"None of that, go play with your brothers." Mrs. Weasley said, shaking her wand at Harry.

"They're just a bit crazy." Harry admitted, biting his lip and wishing he hadn't spent so much time studying in the morning. Pomfrey allowed him five hours a day over the break, but he'd already studied for three that day.

"The craziness is good for you, as is the exercise. According to Poppy you need sleep, food, and exercise and you will get it if it's the last thing I do. Now out!" Mrs. Weasley replied, quickly sending a spell to the knives to start cutting up her vegetables.

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley." Harry replied immediately.

"Harry, Ginny, get your buttocks out here!" One of the twins called from outside.

Harry grinned and headed out, shivering despite himself as the December air hit him.

"Cast a heating spell, dumbass." Ginny ordered from behind him.

I forgot about those, Harry realized, blushing and quickly charming the air around him to stay warm.

Spells are useless if I don't remember to use them, Harry chastised himself.

"Harry, catch!" Fred called. Harry turned quickly and caught the Cleansweep 5 Fred had tossed to him. "You play Chaser against me. Ginny, want to play Beater against George?"

"Sure." Ginny asked, taking the Cleansweep Fred passed her.

"Alright, four-way games start when you hit the air. So, three, two-"

"Want a couple of Keepers in there?" A deep voice called from the front path. Harry turned his head swiftly and caught sight of Bill and Charlie making their way off the path toward the back yard.

Harry heard Mrs. Weasley's excited scream from inside and grinned as the woman came running out, waving her arms.

"Alright, up in the air, let's go." Bill continued when he managed to wrangle himself from Mrs. Weasley's hugs.

"Did you bring your own brooms?" Ginny called out.

"Of course." Bill answered, pulling a strap off his shoulder and pulling a Nimbus 2000 off his back.

"Sweet!" Ginny grinned.

"Gringotts supplies them." Bill replied. "Charlie, you left yours here, right?" He asked, turning to the brother beside him.

"Yeah, it's inside. Wait a minute, I'll grab it." Charlie said, trotting toward the house.

"See if Ronnikins will stop being a prat while you're at it." George called after him.

Charlie turned slightly, running backwards toward the house as he raised his arms.

"Not getting involved!" He called back.

Charlie came back with a Cleansweep, and jumped into the air with them. The game started immediately, and Harry found himself above the group in a second, looking for the Snitch, before he remembered that he was playing Chaser. He lowered himself down to their level, in time to see Bill block a hard throw by Fred, sending the ball flying off toward the woods.

Harry raced off, feeling Fred speeding behind him and watching the Quaffle start to free-fall toward the ground. Harry dived, though he knew the ball was going to hit the ground way before he reached it, loving the rush and competition that he'd lost sitting alone in the library during every Quidditch game.

Harry reached forward for the Quaffle, hating that it was going to hit the ground and force him out of the air too. As soon as he reached forward he felt his magic reacting within him, mirroring that will to have the ball in his hand. Harry felt hard leather crack against his chest and automatically brought his hand up to keep the Quaffle against his chest as he spun his broom around, ball in hand.

The first thing Harry saw was that George was not in a good place to catch the Quaffle for him. Only then did Harry realize that the entire game had stopped. The Weasleys were all hovering on their brooms, staring at him. Harry started flying toward them slowly, holding the ball close.

"Guys?" Harry asked, before he realized that he'd just used wandless magic, something they'd never seen him do. Then he remembered that magic was against the rules in Quidditch, and that he'd just fouled.

"Sorry, foul." Harry said, tossing the ball to Ginny. She caught it automatically without taking her eyes off him, or shifting her agape expression.

"Harry, you just accio'd that wandlessly. I saw that, right?" Fred said quietly.

This is good, Harry thought, looking over their shocked faces. He wanted people to learn that he was stronger than a 16 year old Hogwarts student; he was a wizard in his own right, and he could be an asset in the war, if only people wouldn't get in his way. He had to show his strengths and weaknesses in magic now, to teach the world that he was someone to listen to, and to show the Order he was a weapon they could use.

"Yes." Harry answered, watching as all of the Weasley's slowly flew over to him. "It's one of the first things I started trying to learn this summer."

"You learned wandless magic in a summer?" Bill asked, his eyebrows raised.

"No, it took me until I was at Hogwarts to really learn it, and then I had to learn how to do it with either hand." Harry answered honestly.



"So say, six months?" Charlie estimated.

"About that." Harry replied, nodding.

"Harry, I don't understand. How did you learn wandless magic?" Ginny asked, pushing her broom forward and back in the air.

"I concentrated on what magic feels like, and once I understood how magic moves through a wand, I pushed it to do the same through my hands." Harry answered as simply as he could, running a hand through his hair slowly.

"That's – that sounds impossible." Ginny replied.

"Well impossible or not, don't do it. Otherwise Fred will spend the entire game shooting easy foul shots." George cut in, backing his broom away from the group. He started flying circles around the group, and Fred soon backed up and joined him.

"Alright, let's play!" Fred called out.

"This would be serious news for the Order." Bill put in quietly.

"Yeah, but Quidditch is far more important." Ginny grinned.

"I'm supposed to play for an hour." Harry replied, thinking of Pomfrey's order for him to put in at least an hour of exercise a week.

"Alright, we play, but Charlie, we should speak about the next Order meeting." Bill replied.

"Awesome." Charlie replied, backing his broom away quickly.

Harry backed up and saw the bludgers circling around them suddenly speed up. Charlie had called off the time-out, and they

were on to play.

Move, Harry bent over his broom, trying to become as slick as possible as he raced after the Quaffle, carefully not using his magic to catch it as he caught up to it and spun on a dime. In a blink he was racing off toward the hoops, wanting to laugh at the wonderful feeling of speed and air that meant he was flying.

Harry saw the hoop closest to him and threw the Quaffle, knowing already that Charlie wasn't going to be able to block it. He raced back, knowing from George and Bill's cheers that he'd scored.

"Well shot, Harry!" Bill called out as Harry returned to their side of the backyard.

"How the hell do you fly that fast on a Cleansweep?" George asked.

"Brooms are partly powered by our own magic, concentrate your magic on moving quickly and the broom will respond to that." Harry said, before flying off toward where Charlie was throwing the Quaffle.

Harry got in two more goals easily, speeding past everyone else on the field and reaching the hoops before Charlie was prepared to stop him. Harry sighed after his second goal and shook his head, flying toward the center of the yard.

"Harry when did you get this good?" Ginny asked, joining him quickly.

"My magic." Harry said, running a hand threw his hair with frustration.

"Hey Harry, what's up?" Fred asked as he flew over to them.

"I can't play." Harry answered.

"Hell's balls, you can't play, you play better than any of us, we need you." Ginny snorted.

"No, I mean it's because of my magic that I can't play. It's like I'm cheating." Harry replied, waving a hand toward Charlie's goal hoops as Bill and Fred joined them.

"Eh, you're better than us, that's cool. I'm better than Bill, Fred's better than George." Charlie replied, shrugging.

"Fred? Better than me? That's nonsense." George protested.

"Indeed." Fred replied. "Everyone knows we score exactly the same."

"And fly the same." George agreed.

"We are the same." Fred shrugged.

"Merlin's knickers you are." Charlie answered.

"I'll be Seeker. Whichever team has a higher score when I catch the Snitch wins." Harry interrupted.

"You sure? We don't mind." Bill said.

"Yeah." Harry nodded.

"Accio Snitch." Charlie cast, pointing his wand toward the shed and catching the yellow Snitch that flew straight into his hand.

"Alright, you start the game." Charlie said, handing the tiny ball to Harry carefully.

Harry felt the Snitch fluttering around in his hand, already trying to escape and smiled at the memories it brought up.

"Let's fly." Harry said, releasing the ball and waiting for the Weasleys to continue the game before he lifted up into the air and began his

search for the Snitch.

Harry waited until the end of his hour of exercise before he caught the Snitch. He landed with the rest of the Weasleys and walked toward the house, grateful to see that he was as sweaty and wind-struck as the rest of them.

"Harry," Bill called from behind Harry as he was about to enter the house behind the twins and Ginny.

Harry turned, his hand still on the door handle, to look at Bill. Harry raised his eyebrows in surprise, sure that the older boy had never spoken to him as directly before.

"Would you like to go on a walk? I'd like to talk to you." Bill said, jerking his head back toward the orchard 'Quidditch pitch'.

"Of course." Harry answered as he stepped away from the door, curious as to what Bill Weasley wanted from him.

I don't know him well, Harry explained to himself, even as he grimaced at the protective shields he wandlessly rose around himself before walking off alone with the boy.

"I'll tell Mum to put off dinner for a bit." Charlie offered, nodding at Bill.

"Thanks." Bill replied quickly as Charlie entered the house.

So they both know what is going on, Harry figured, wondering when the two had decided to talk to him and what they both would want from him.

Harry felt intensely strong silencing wards rise around them and glanced at Bill's hands, only getting a glimpse of Bill's wand disappearing up the older wizard's sleeve. Harry wandlessly rose his own wards around Bill's, unsure whose were stronger but knowing

the combined wards would be still better.

"You know wandless magic." Bill said as they walked into the orchard.

"Yes." Harry answered, glancing up at the taller boy. To his surprise Bill let out a deep sigh, pushing out his cheeks and touching a fist to his lips like he was accepting something huge.

"Harry, I don't think you should share this with the Order." Bill said.

"Didn't you say this would be serious news for them?" Harry asked, feeling stupid. Was Bill telling him that he still wasn't ready for the Order.

If that's the case, screw them, Harry thought, trying to figure out a way he'd start fighting a war on his own. He needed to know where the Death Eaters were fighting, what they were about to do, or he'd never be able to stop the raids. Single killings weren't going to be enough.

Simple, Harry thought, grimacing at the word.

"There are spies in the Order," Bill said, pulling Harry sharply out of his thoughts.

Oh.

"I have no idea how many there are, but I know that Death Eaters have been responding to our attacks as if they've had years to prepare for them. I'm starting to think we are as riddled with traitors as the Ministry." Bill continued, staring off past the orchard as he walked.

"Do you think it could be Snape?" Harry asked.

"If it is, he's not the only one. Information has gotten out that I carefully ensured he was not privy to." Bill answered. "But honestly, I have nothing to work on when it comes to Snape. I didn't like him any more than you while I was at Hogwarts, but I was eleven, thirteen, seventeen. I didn't like him because he was ugly and gave Charlie bad grades. That hardly makes him a spy." Bill said, shaking his head, his ponytail swinging back and forth over his back.

"Everyone but Dumbledore was sure that Mundungus was selling information as he did caldrons, to whoever and whatever wanted to buy from him. No one wants to say it about a man who died in action, but Fletcher could very well have been more of a liability for the Order than he was an asset." He continued.

Harry listened to the information, nodding as he took it in, relieved at the thought that for once, finally, someone was giving him information before they expected him to make a decision.

"Mundungus taught us that Dumbledore isn't always willing to make the hard decisions. I don't believe Dumbledore wanted to see a traitor in his trusted Order of the Pheonex, and he ignored the warnings we gave him, which is a very worrying thing to see. There are more spies, we all know it, and yet Dumbledore isn't working to contain that. That's my first point." Bill said.

"Alright." Harry answered, nodding. They reached the end of the orchard and Bill sat on a tree stump near the line of trees. Harry found a fallen log close by and sat facing him.

"My second point is this: your wandless magic will scare people." Bill said flatly, his eyes locked on Harry's.

Harry let his face mirror his surprise, raising his eyebrows at the Weasley across from him.

"Here are the wizards I know of who exhibited wandless magic:

Grindewald, Dumbledore, Voldemort."

Bill said. "I've only seen Dumbledore use wandless magic twice, and most have practically forgotten that he can do it, if they ever knew. Which leaves the public with Grindewald and Voldemort." Bill said.

"It's like parseltongue." Harry replied, picking up a stick on the ground and wandlessly transforming it to a ball to toss back and forth in his hands. He saw Bill's eyes widen and looked up, to see Bill staring at his hands.

"If all of us hadn't seen that during Quidditch I'd say right now that I've gone mental. That's intense, Harry." Bill said, lifting his head up to catch Harry's eyes again.

"People got used to my parseltongue, they could get used to this." Harry argued, though his words sounded childish in his ears.

"I think people at Hogwarts mostly forgot about your parseltongue. Use it again and I bet they'd go mental all over again." Bill answered. "I know the Prophet had to threaten to fire Rita Skeeter if she were to publish the news and try to burn you with it." He said.

"How do you know that?" Harry asked, leaning forward. He'd always wondered why the entire wizarding world hadn't turned against him that year.

"The Ministry is riddled with spies, remember?" Bill said, grinning.

"In the department for the Daily Prophet?" Harry asked, surprised.

"We only wish we had a controlling population there. Think, we could have avoided the libel against you, protected Dumbledore's reputation and had the wizarding world aware of Voldemort's return a full year ago." Bill said. "Don't underestimate the power of bad press, seriously. Luckily Voldemort has not yet started spreading newspaper

articles about his benevolence, else we may be fighting a whole civil war in Wizarding Britain."

Harry laughed, shaking his head at the thought of Death Eater supporters picketting Grimmauld Place, trying to spread the word of Voldemort's good intentions. To his surprise, when he looked up at Bill the older Weasley was just looking at him, shaking his head slowly.

"No Harry I'm actually serious about that one. With enough press twisting numbers and misconstruing events, people will join almost anything." Bill replied. "I don't think even Fudge knew the damage he did to our effort in publishing those articles against you and Dumbledore."

"What do the numbers say from our end?" Harry asked, finally finding time to ask what he wanted. "I've heard the Death Eater theory that we have support in the 4,000s." He said.

"Who did you hear say that?" Bill asked, looking suddenly hopeful.

"When I got –sick," Harry stumbled, searching for the right word.

Shit, think, then speak.

"My magic was weakened to a point that I couldn't keep myself out of the connection to Voldemort's head. I could see what he was seeing, hear everything around him, and sometimes even smell it." Harry replied, struggling not to think about the memory too much.

"I heard the Death Eater Avery reporting those numbers to Voldemort." Harry said. "Are they accurate?"

"Frankly, no." Bill answered, shaking his head. "We've been using our spies in the Death Eater ranks and reporting false numbers to the Order members we know are disloyal, hoping Voldemort would not



attack our known strongholds. The truth is a strong force could wipe out almost all of our defenses." Bill admitted, rubbing a hand around his neck.

"All of them?" Harry asked immediately.

"I might not even be exaggerating. We're struggling, Harry. Really, really struggling. The Order used to be powerful, it had Dumbledore's connections, hundreds of fighters, and thousands of supporters. You saw that photo of the main organizers; the vast majority of them were dead or in hiding in a different country. We're down to maybe a hundred supporters, not even two dozen fighters, and we have no idea how many of those supporters are actually spies. I don't want to think about what a strong Death Eater advance could do to us." Bill said.

"How does this tie into my wandless magic?" Harry asked, beginning to feel lost in the conversation.

"Harry, we need supporters, we need the public. The Daily Prophet has finally stopped writing against you and we need it to stay that way. If you tell the Order about your wandless magic, word will get out about it. I know that if you tell Dumbledore, he will pass the information onto the Order. He trusts them, but I think it's wise to do the same, and I don't know how much damage fear could do right now. Voldemort works on fear, on convincing the public that it is safer to be with him than against him. The fact that their other option is another parseltongue, another wizard with wandless magic, could make people even more resistant to moving against Voldemort." Bill said.

"I'll hide my wandless magic." Harry agreed. "For now, anyway." He decided.

"It will make a wicked surprise attack, Harry. You will look defenseless and be anything but." Bill said, his voice sounding

hopeful again. "That might give you the opening you need to end this."

Harry nodded, before remembering a problem.

"Won't Fred, George, and Ginny have just told your parents about this?" Harry asked, looking back toward the house.

"No. We made an agreement at the beginning of this summer. No one shares any information with an Order member until we decide together that it's safe for the world to know." Bill answered, sighing as he stood up.

"That bad?" Harry asked, following him.

"No one trusts anyone implicitly right now, Harry. We trust our parents, but we know they will tell the Order, and we haven't been given any reason to trust the Order's secrecy, and we've been given many reasons not to." Bill answered.

"How the hell are we going to win this war, then?" Harry asked, wondering at a 'military force' that couldn't trust even a single secret to stay quiet.

"Right now, I think we're all quietly counting on you doing it for us before we get overrun." Bill answered, glancing over at Harry.

Harry felt his eyes widen against his will.

"How much time is that?" Harry asked, feeling like he was choking on the words.

"I have no idea." Bill said, a finality in his voice that made Harry want to shiver.

"Shite." Harry said concisely, walking toward the twisted, tiny house

full of people he loved.

"Has Mum said what's for dinner?" Bill asked suddenly, shoving his hands in the back pockets of his pants.

"No." Harry answered, grateful for the easier conversation.

"She may have said something about goose when she was strangling me earlier, but I'm not sure. I was rather smothered at the time." Bill commented, shrugging.

"I believe those were hugs." Harry grinned as they entered the garden.

"Oh. That explains a lot." Bill replied, his tone perfectly serious. Harry chuckled, and walked toward the side door, preparing himself for the inevitable rush of heat and noise opening the door would bring him.

"Oh Harry wait." Bill said at the last minute again.

Harry turned, his hand again on the door handle.

"Careful about polyjuice next time. I met you first in your forth year, Charlie and I made the tables spar. It's me, but watch that." Bill said.

Harry felt his entire face flush with fear. He hadn't checked. He hadn't thought to check, even though he'd only seen the two brothers walk up the path together, he had no proof if they were who they said.

Shite. Harry cursed again. He'd been taught to do that.

Spells are useless if I can't remember to cast them, Harry told himself again, cursing under his breath.

"Nice silencing spell though." Bill said.

"How did you-" Harry started.

Can Bill feel magic too? Harry wondered. He couldn't think of another explanation; his silencing spell didn't have any casting images.

"I'll explain later. Food first." Bill said, gesturing forward.

"Right." Harry said, still feeling shocked.

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"Another game?" Harry asked, gesturing to the international checkers board Charlie had brought home.

"Nah. I should be off to bed. I'm still used to getting up at four in the morning everyday."

"Four in the morning? Hell, what Death Eater do you work for?" Fred asked without looking up from his game of Exploding Snap with George.

"A dragon." Charlie grinned. "They've gotta be fed every six hours or they start getting far more aggressive. Hunt mode." He answered.

"We don't get up until nine. It's Boat's job to open at seven. No way are we doing it." George replied.

"Boat?" Harry asked as he cleaned up the checkers board.

"New employee, he started a couple months ago." Fred explained.

"His name's Robert Ron Rosterson, if you'll believe it." George added with a grin.

"And you call him Boat?" Charlie asked as he stood up from his chair.

"Row, row, row, would be my guess." Bill supplied from his place on the couch, shaking his head.

"Brilliant." Harry laughed.

"Eh, I think I'll follow you, Charlie, bed sounds good and this way I won't wake you up." Bill said, getting up slowly.

"And another one hits the dust." Fred complained. "We still have to

go to work tomorrow and yet everyone is going to bed before us."

"You still have work tomorrow?" Harry asked, surprised.

"Are you kidding? The Christmas season is doubling our sales, we work until midday Christmas Eve. By tradition most of Diagon Alley is open until midnight every night this week, but I bet most of the stores are regretting that. Stores are struggling out there. No one wants to go out in public or show the world what they're spending money on." George said.

"Then why are you staying open?" Harry asked.

"We put ourselves into the floo system, we're now the second opening into Diagon Alley with the Leaky Caldron. People floo in and floo out without having to touch the streets." Fred answered.

"Isn't that dangerous?" Harry asked, concerned.

"The wards on the fireplace aren't all that much weaker than those on the walls and front door." George answered, shrugging.

Harry nodded, considering the magical theory in that. Open-magic transport objects were the hardest to ward, but it was possible to do it well. He'd check it, Harry promised himself.

"In any case, Boast pulled the shortest straw, he works until closing tonight. Everyone is back from Hogwarts and Durmstrang and apparently every returning student in the nation simultaneously decided to buy a Wheezes telescope to punch their brother at home." George replied in his usual joking tone.

"Not to mention the Pigmy Puffs. We sold out of those in two days; I had to order three more crates. The whole store is squeaking." Fred complained.

"Wow." Harry said, grinning.

"Personally I'm glad we have a sister who'd prefer a box of our fireworks to set off in the house than a pink ball of fluff that squeaks. Ron's owl is less annoying than those things." Fred said.

"Is that what you're getting Ginny, then?" Harry asked.

"Yeah. Mum's gunna kill us." I think Pigmy's are cute but once that last crate sells we're going to declare ourselves against fluffy pets and stop offering them. They drive Fred nuts, and he's right about their care being expensive. We had to get a special license just to order them." George explained.

Harry nodded.

"You're staying awake to hide from the prat upstairs?" Fred asked as he cleared up the Exploding Snap game from the floor.

I'm staying awake to sneak out, Harry decided, but quickly decided Fred's was a better answer.

"Something like that." Harry said, nodding.

"Want company?" George asked. "We'd stay up a couple more hours with you if you'd like. It is only ten."

"Thanks, but I'm fine." Harry replied. "Alone can be good too." He said.

"Whelp, we're off to bed too then." Fred replied, easily cheerful again.

Harry nodded gratefully.

"Goodnight, Harry." They said at the same time, heading toward the stairs.

"Don't be surprised if the sound of a screeching pterodactyl wakes you in the morning. Fleur Delacour is coming tomorrow morning. Mom is likely to descend with claws out." George said, turning back to Harry.

Harry grinned and nodded.

"Duly noted." He laughed.

"You know, sometimes I feel bad for the poor girl." Fred sighed. "Those scratch marks are going to do hell for her complexion." He said.

"Anyway, night Harry." George laughed, pulling Fred toward the stairs.

"Night." Harry said, waiting until they were out of sight before he headed for the floo powder on the mantel. Harry cast a strong silencing spell over the fireplace, hoping it wouldn't react badly with the transportation magic, and grabbed a small handful.

Harry threw the powder into the hearth and breathed in relief when the green fire flashed up silently.

"The Leaky Caldron." Harry whispered as he crouched in the fireplace.

He started to swirl shakily, slamming against the side of the chimney system as he spun.

He'd forgotten how much he hated traveling by floo, Harry considered as he stepped dizzily into the Leaky Caldron, keeping a hand on the wall for balance. He pulled his wand in his hand, remembering Bill's words about revealing his wandless magic as he magicked the dust off of his cloak and robes.



The Leaky Caldron was surprisingly empty, Harry noticed as his eyes adjusted to the dark. He was used to seeing the tiny pub crowded with wizard's calling to Tom for extra drinks. Instead there were only two men in the pub, both sitting at a table facing into the room. All of the tables were rearranged, Harry noticed, glancing around the room. The chairs were all arranged to sit against the walls, facing toward the door or toward the fireplace.

Paranoia, Harry thought. Even common wizards didn't feel safe with strangers behind them, he guessed, walking outside.

Harry stepped into the back and tapped the bricks to open the doorway to Diagon Alley. Wizards hiding their faces from the cold with hooded robes and thick scarves rushed down the windy street around him. Harry took out a slip of paper from his pocket, a small Christmas list, and headed for Madam Malkin's to start his shopping. He'd decided to get a pair of high-quality robes for Mr. Weasley, and he was hoping to get something for Mrs. Weasley at Madam Pimpernelle's Beautifying Potions next-door.

~~HP~~

Harry was leaving Obscurus Books, Hermione's gift in hand, when he saw a massive, blond man walking out of Slug and Jiggers Apothecary across the street. He recognized him, Harry realized, feeling all of the blood in his face sink toward his shoes. The brutal-faced man had been in the raids. He'd taken his mask off and tried to rub ash out of his eyes, growling "bleedin' muggles even burn nasty."

Harry felt his stomach churn at the thought, and quietly miniaturized his last purchases into the pockets of his robes.

He followed the man quietly, staying across the street from him and gazing at the man over his list, pretending to read while he walked.

He saw the man slow down his walk and slid into that had two exits into Diagon Alley.

He walked into Eeylops Owl Emporium quickly, walking immediately through the maze of owl stands, cages, and treats to the second door.

"Can I help you?" Asked an attractive girl at the front.

"Just—er--looking for owl nuts." Harry said, gesturing toward the packages closest to the glass door. He saw the massive Death Eater discretely slip his wand out of his sleeve into his hand. He didn't use a wandmotion, and Harry knew immediately that his magic wasn't going to pick up anything from the spell inside the warded shop.

Harry glanced at the girl who was watching him curiously and pretended to search the shelves.

"Perfect." He said suddenly, grabbing a random brand. "I'm glad you have Mad Hatter's Crazy Nuts, they're Hedwig's favorite." He said, carrying the package to the front quickly and throwing a galleon on the counter.

"It's only sixteen knuts, sir." The girl said, glancing at the money and looking at him. Harry watched her eyes dart to his scar and suddenly widen.

"Sorry, I don't have change." Harry replied, knowing it would take him a lot longer to count out the coins.

"No worries." The girl said, smiling at him fully and pushing coins at him. Harry grabbed them, smiled quickly, and walked as quickly as he could out the door.

Was this a good way to avoid being caught following, or a good way to lose him? Harry wondered as soon as he'd exited.

Harry cursed under his breath, unable to see the blond man. He ambled quietly over to where he'd last seen the man, and glanced around. There didn't seem to be anything strange about the spot. It was right in front of the boarded up Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour, but Harry could stretch out his magic into the unwarded building and feel that no one was inside.

There was an alleyway behind it, Harry remembered suddenly, picturing the time in third year when Mr. Fortescue had let him sit on the back step to avoid having sun in his face as he ate his daily icecream cone.

Harry walked slowly down the street, finding the tiny space between the Parlour and the next building easily. It was a quiet, dark little space that was easy to forget, filled with a couple wooden crates, a broken broom and a cracked toilet with a plant growing out of it. Harry walked into it casually, wandlessly raising protective wards around himself and turning around to see if anyone was looking at him curiously from Diagon Alley. All he saw was a witch and her daughter shivering as they entered Obscurus Books down the street.

Harry nodded to himself and cast an invisibility spell, carefully checking to make sure he couldn't see any of his body and trying to use the reflection off the porcelain 'flowerpot' to check his face. He couldn't see anything reflected in the porcelain, even despite the bright clear night, and decided he'd have to trust in his concentration and skill with the spell.

Harry walked toward the end of the alleyway, feeling a protective ward covering the back wall of it.

That wall is pure magic, Harry thought, feeling the transfiguration-mixed wards in the brick wall in front of him. Harry concentrated on the magic, unable to feel past it to the alleyway he knew stood behind the ice cream parlor. There was even an

anti-apparation ward over it, Harry realized, guessing that the ward was not licensed with the ministry as anti-apparation wards were supposed to be.

It's a good sign that the Death Eater went this way, Harry thought, knowing no one was going to make such advanced wards to hide the random alleyway while leaving the entire building unprotected. The alley was used for something someone didn't want seen, he knew that at least, Harry decided.

I can't get through this magic without forcing through it, Harry knew immediately, not daring to even touch the warded wall. He'd set off casting images and alarms by just touching it. Casting a spell on it would likely do the same, and he had no doubt that breaking down the wards enough to pass by them would at the very least let the caster know exactly what had happened.

And I have no idea how many Death Eaters are on the other side of this ward, Harry thought, wishing to hell and back that he had a way to pass through wards rather than just smashing them down.

I need to study that, Harry growled to himself, damning Pomfrey for his restrictive studying schedule. He needed to get through this ward and he couldn't without possibly getting killed as soon as it was down.

Damn it!, Harry thought, restraining himself from shouting or kicking the porcelain toilet by his foot. The last thing he needed to do was bring attention to himself because he couldn't get through the wards without bringing attention to himself.

I bought more books on breaking through wards, Harry reminded himself calmly, remembering the hour he'd just spent going between Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley bookstores.

He came in this way, maybe he'll come out this way. Harry

considered, staring moodily at the warded wall.

Which means I have to wait. He concluded sourly, casting a quick tempus spell to know that it was going on 11:15. The Leaky Caldron and the Weasley's Wizard Wheezes closed at midnight, and those were the only floos out of the street, and he still needed to get Ginny's Christmas present. He couldn't wait long.

Harry conjured a simple wooden chair and sat down to wait in the cramped space, his head resting against one wall and his feet crunched against the other.

Within two minutes he was jerking his head over toward the wall, hearing the sound of it. What he saw almost made him shout in surprise. A man was three steps from him, walking quickly, about to run into Harry's invisible legs.

Harry pulled himself out of his chair as quickly as he could, praying the chair didn't tilt or shake with the action.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Harry thought as he pulled himself against the wall next to his chair and tried to silence his breathing, doubting the man would walk right past him without noticing something. Harry felt himself pulling in his stomach and standing on tiptoes as the man approached, and suddenly stopped a foot from him, staring at the chair.

It wasn't there before, he remembers, shite! Harry thought, fighting down the panicky, bubbly feeling that felt ready to pull his stomach up through his throat.

Please ignore it, please ignore it, Harry pleaded, watching out of the side of his eye as the man blinked puzzlingly at the chair.

Harry started raising more shielding spells around himself, praying the man didn't guess where he was and cast Avada Kedavra,

knowing fullwell he didn't have a good chance of transfiguring up a physical barrier before the killing spell reached him.

The man stepped forward then, lifting his hand up to touch the chair and tip it out of his way as he walked past. Harry held his breath, focusing on staying still and balanced on his tiptoes as the man walked in front of him.

Harry felt the man's robes brush his side and clenched his eyes shut, focusing on his magic and preparing to react to any curse he felt the man casting.

Harry waited a second and carefully opened his eyes, to see the alleyway clear. His magic confirmed it; the man had gone.

Harry let himself breathe out quietly, and retransfigured the chair into a stick on the ground, only then remembering that he had a miniaturized chair in his pocket. If he'd used the fancier, cushioned chair, Harry had little doubt the man would have noticed it. He could have died right then, Harry accepted, wanting to bang his head into the brick wall. God he'd survived because of what he'd forgotten.

Harry was pulled out of his churning thoughts by the sounds of footsteps from the brick wall again. He automatically pushed himself against the wall again before he recognized the huge, brutal-faced blond man who'd he'd decided to follow, now walking towards him.

Petrificus internus, Harry cast, not daring to hesitate or even spend the time to use his wand. He felt the cold magic pass through him and wanted to shudder as he saw the large man's eyes go glassy as his entire huge form simply crumpled to the ground. Harry had to back up to not get hit by the tall man's falling head.

Harry grabbed the stick he'd transfigured the chair into and instantly turned it into a My Little Pony in his hand, remembering the feel of the spell's magic before. He threw it onto the corpse, wanting to

shudder as the little doll rolled off of the still body to land on the hard ground.

I've got to leave, Harry realized immediately, remembering that he had no idea how many more Death Eaters there were beyond that ward, ready to walk out of it. Harry felt panic rising in him again as he turned his back on the ward and forced himself to walk, not run, back into Diagon Alley. He couldn't have his feet showing because he'd been sloppy as he ran, Harry reminded himself, even as he felt his heart speeding.

Harry walked straight for the Leaky Caldron, deciding as he walked to owl-order Ginny's present.

The Leaky Caldron was empty except for Tom, Harry saw with relief as he entered it quietly, still invisible. Tom would have to accept floo powder being used by the invisible, Harry decided as he threw a galleon into the pot beside the fireplace and received a handful of the green powder in return.

Tom's probably used to it, Harry realized as he threw the powder into the fireplace and heard the fire roar up. Harry glanced back and saw Tom still engrossed in wiping down tables, seemingly ignoring the fireplace entirely.

"The Burrow." Harry whispered once he'd gotten himself into the fireplace.

Harry stepped into the safety of the warded, friendly home, feeling his heart already start to slow down as he wandlessly cleaned off his robes and stepped away from the fireplace before canceling the invisibility spell.

I did it again, Harry thought, canceling his shielding and heating spells as he walked.

It wasn't right, he thought. Nothing about killing someone in an alleyway was right. But the man had deserved to die, and more importantly, the war needed him to die. It wasn't wrong either, he thought. Somehow that seemed both simple and enormously complicated at the same time.

I wish I could talk to Dumbledore about it, Harry thought, before shuddering at the idea.

I'm Harry Potter and I'm killing people. Harry thought, rubbing a hand down his face as he entered the kitchen. He remembered all of the excitement and joy the wizarding population had shown toward his existence, all of the articles about the 'boy hero', 'winner of the triwizard tournament' and 'chosen one'.

This isn't what they wanted, Harry thought, almost wanting to snort. He wasn't going to be a boy hero, Harry knew. He was going to fight in the war, really fight in it, and that meant something that somehow the wizarding population still didn't understand.

Something I suspect I'm only starting to understand, Harry thought, remembering killing Jugson and only then realizing that it had to happen again. Now he felt like he was making a pattern of it. He was figuring out what spells he needed to learn to kill better, and somehow he was managing to think about it without gagging.

Am I psychopathic? Harry asked himself suddenly, stopping walking entirely as he stared at his calm expression in his reflection on the glass window in the kitchen. Was killing not simple at all? Was he supposed to feel something more than he did?

It was necessary, Harry reminded himself, feeling the truth in that.

Am I wrong for not feeling regret because it's necessary? He asked himself. Was he supposed to be crying in a corner somewhere, sobbing as he cast his spells or at least sobbing afterward? Harry



remembered the raids and saw himself shaking his head in his reflection, his longer hair shaking next to his ears. Jugson had deserved to die. Whoever he'd killed tonight had probably deserved it just as much, and even if he didn't, he was a Death Eater. The war needed that man to die, Harry knew that. Why would he be supposed to cry about what he didn't actually regret?

So I don't feel anything because I don't have anything to regret? Couldn't I think that I don't have anything to regret because I don't feel anything? Harry wondered suddenly, feeling his thoughts twist even as he considered that.

It doesn't matter. Harry realized suddenly, and felt his thoughts settle. It didn't matter if he was supposed to feel something and didn't; it wouldn't matter if he needed to sob in a corner after every kill or if he was psychopathic enough to go shopping for boots instead. He needed to kill, and he was going to, he was going to learn the spells he needed to know to do it safer, and he was going to teach wizards to fear becoming Death Eaters more than they feared the Death Eaters themselves, because the war needed him to. He'd become whatever the war needed him to be, even if that meant psychotic enough to walk away from a corpse and send out an owl-order for Christmas presents for his friends.

Harry felt dizzy and tired suddenly, and realized the adrenaline was starting to drain from his body. He prayed that Ron was already asleep, and not waiting up to have a shouting match with him. All Harry wanted for the night was to undress and sleep until the morning came.

~~HP~~

Harry woke up to see Ron pulling on his shoes.

"Good morning." Harry said, rubbing his hands over his eyes sleepily.

"Think it is absolutely LOVELY." Harry heard Mrs. Weasley's voice say from all the way downstairs.

Harry glanced at Ron, his eyebrows drawn toward his forehead, expecting his friend to be mirroring his expression. Instead, Ron was plodding across the room, one hand wrapped in a tight fist as he grabbed the door and threw it open.

"Right." Harry said quietly, rolling his head back on his neck and deciding to go shower and get dressed.

He walked downstairs shortly later to see Mrs. Weasley glaring at Fleur from across the kitchen.

Harry approached Ginny where she was sitting at the kitchen table, breaking the ends off of a huge pile of green beans beside her.

"What is 'absolutely lovely'?" Harry asked as he sat down, quietly mimicking Mrs. Weasley's tone.

"The weather. Fleur mistakenly implied that 'eet eez a bit chilly out today, no?' Scandalous, really, for her to say that." Ginny said, mock scoffing toward where Fleur was hugging Bill in the living room.

"Horrid." Harry replied.

"Guh, she's nasty, I'll give Mum that much, but this is already getting ridiculous." Ginny said, shaking her head back and forth.

"Isn't Hermione supposed to be here?" Harry asked, changing the subject.

"She's out back with Ron and Charlie degnoming the garden." Ginny answered. "Help me with these." She ordered, shoving a small pile of the green beans across the table to him.

"Just breaking the ends off?" Harry asked, pulling the pile closer.

"Yeah." Ginny nodded, continuing.

I killed someone last night and now I'm preparing green beans, Harry thought, unsure what to think about that.

It doesn't matter, Harry reminded himself, and pulled his thoughts out of the subject.

"What did Bill talk to you about yesterday?" Ginny asked, shoving more of her pile to him as he finishing his own.

"The Order." Harry said honestly. "I'm thinking about joining it."

"They're not going to allow you to." Ginny responded, shooting an annoyed look at her mother.

"I don't know, they can't keep me out of this war." Harry replied.

Ginny snorted loudly.

"Chosen one." She laughed. Harry nodded and chuckled, turning his attention back to the beans.

"Harry," Bill called suddenly. Harry looked up from his place preparing green beans with Ginny and saw Charlie, Ron, and Hermione stomping in from the garden. Bill jerked his head out the door. Harry nodded and held up a finger. He needed to greet Hermione before he disappeared, Harry figured.

"Hi Harry!" Hermione said, dashing over. Harry got up and only just managed to have his feet under him before Hermione was pulling him into a hug.

"How are you doing?" She asked ecstatically.

"About as well as on Sunday." Harry replied, quietly reminding her how recently they'd seen each other.

"Oh I'm filthy, I should go get changed." Hermione said, smiling happily and brushing at dirt on her robes.

"Someone's hyper." Ginny muttered.

"I just sorta love degnoming." Hermione grinned before she raced toward the stairs.

"I'll finish these. You go have your oh-so-subtle secret meeting." Ginny said, jerking her head toward where Bill and Charlie were talking.

Harry fought back a blush, and nodded, pushing his beans back toward her pile.

"I can help, if you teach me." Fleur said as she walked gracefully toward the table.

"You don't know how to break the ends off of green beans?" Ginny asked, sounding aggressive. Harry heard Bill sigh from his place in the living room, and headed over toward the older brothers.

"She's definitely not getting the warmest reception." Charlie was whispering as Harry came over.

"No kidding." Bill said.

"What's up?" Harry asked, stopping in front of them.

"Right." Charlie said, turning and leading them toward the back door. Harry cast a wandless heating spell over himself as he walked out with them and sat on the brick steps down from the back porch. He rose silencing spells around them once they'd closed the door to the house, and waited for them to speak.

"Here's the deal," Charlie said, sitting down beside him on the steps and casually casting silencing spells of his own, waving his wand over the entire porch. "At this point everyone knows you are training yourself to be the best you can be, and we've both decided that we'd like to help, if you need us at all." He said simply.

Harry stayed quiet for a moment, considering their words and nodding quietly to himself.

"Right now I think I need to learn how to break through wards, how to legilimise, how to cast memory charms, and how to apparate." Harry counted out, staring down at the snow melting against his heating charm.

"Well I can help you with breaking through wards." Bill said with a chuckle, sounding pleased. "Honestly I wouldn't know who to point you to in learning how to legilimise. I'd say Snape but ironically, his loyalty is ambiguous until someone we trust can legilimise him and determine where he stands. I assume you don't want Dumbledore to be teaching you?" Bill asked as he walked past them to stand in the snowy grass facing them.

"Do you think he would?" Harry replied, surprised.

"Frankly, no, Bill. Harry is the 'chosen one', gifted with love. He's supposed to trust implicitly in Dumbledore's mind." Charlie said.

Bill sighed and nodded, pulling his hair out of its strap and letting it fall over his shoulders. Harry blinked, realizing he'd never seen the man with his hair down before. It looked good, less rebellious somehow, Harry noticed.

"Yeah, unfortunately I think you're right. Dumbledore is sentimental. Supposedly he was an excellent general in the past Dark War, but I'm not seeing it." Bill replied, running a hand over the top of his loose hair.

"I'll try him, at least." Harry decided.

"There is another option." Charlie said suddenly.. "Supposedly the best wizard legilimens in the world have to learn directly from the sphinxes. It makes sense, sphinxes invented the magic, so it's a reasonable assumption that they know more than wizards do about it. You could try following that route, answer a sphinx's riddle and somehow convince it to teach you."

"I think the first complication in that is how to even find a sphinx." Harry replied.

Though all I really need is the name of one, Harry thought to himself.

"Actually that's the easy part." Charlie replied. "The sphinx who was in the maze for the Triwizard Tournament is supposedly still indebted to Dumbledore and his cause."

"Indebted? I thought sphinxes were solitary creatures, especially when it came to humans." Bill asked, blinking at his brother.

"The story goes that a man saved the sphinx's honor, and asked in return that the sphinx remain loyal to Dumbledore in his fight against the wizarding Dark Lord." Charlie said with a shrug. "The sphinx won't give the man's name or anything about him, though the common consensus that it is one of Dumbledore's less public achievements." He said.

"Won the loyalty of a sphinx. That's certainly a fascinating one." Bill said, shaking his head.

"In any case, Dumbledore sent a friend of mine to find the sphinx named Rashanon, I'll owl you what more he knows as soon as possible." Charlie offered.

"Thanks." Harry said, nodding gratefully, even as he noted the name could very well be all the information he needed.

"You'll have to answer a riddle though." Charlie warned.

"I know. I managed in forth year, I'll risk trying again." Harry said, remembering the silly 'spider' riddle in the maze.

"No you didn't." Charlie replied, shaking his head. "That was a riddle Dumbledore thought up and asked the sphinx to say. A sphinx's riddle would likely be far more complicated. They're animals known for their ability to twist words and meaning. It's a sign of respect between sphinxes and any other speaking creature. The riddle's difficulty is meant to show another creature that the sphinx in question does not underestimate the others' intelligence."

"And if I get the riddle wrong?" Harry asked.

"You lose that initial respect. That respect is what keeps a sphinx from forcing their way into your mind, despite their love for knowledge. My friend Lance, the man Dumbledore sent on my recommendation, says that if you lose a sphinx's respect before you

learn their way of occlumency, you risk losing all of your secrets." Charlie replied.

"Is that much of a risk?" Bill asked.

"Sphinxes like knowledge and language. The only one interested in the Dark War at all is Dumbledore's

Rashenon." Charlie answered. "I don't believe a sphinx would openly sell out your secrets, but I study and work with dragons. All my information here comes with one or two lunch conversations with Lance."

"What if the sphinx doesn't respect me from the start?" Harry asked, getting an idea.

"He'll probably not crush right into your mind because you stutter or whatever, if that's your question." Charlie answered, looking over at him curiously.

"No I mean, if a riddle's difficulty is a display of respect. What if he doesn't respect me, will he give me an easier riddle?" Harry asked.

"Hey that's a good point." Bill said, grinning.

"That's perfectly possible." Charlie said. "I mean he could give you a harder one simply to laugh at you, but that might be considered disrespecting the riddle tradition. I don't know."

"Worth the shot." Harry decided, nodding.

"My suggestion would be to massacre language as much as you can. Say 'er' a lot, repeat sentences, use terrible grammar and slang, that sort of thing. Foreign slang, if you know it even." Charlie said, his face lighting up with amusement at the idea.



"Sounds fun." Harry said, smiling with them.

"In any case, I can also teach you apparation easily." Charlie added.

"The memory spells I'm afraid you'll have to tackle on your own." Bill said, shaking his head. "Neither of us have any experience with those, thank Merlin."

"After lunch then?" Harry asked, figuring that would give him a few hours to study before they started.

"Unfortunately, I promised Fleur I'd show her the sights around here then, but I could cancel-" Bill started.

"No, I'll teach him Apparation then. You should learn that as soon as possible in any case, and it might save a few years of Mum's life to have Fleur out of the house for a bit." Charlie interrupted.

Harry nodded, agreeing easily.

Bill nodded his thanks, chuckling as he started toward the door, retying his hair as he went.

~~HP~~

"That took me a month to learn." Charlie said, staring at Harry as he disappeared in the backyard. "I side-along apparate with you three times in a row, and you know how to apparate?"

"Yes." Harry answered, approaching him at a walk.

"Merlin's cuticles, how much have you managed to learn in six months then?" He asked.

Harry ignored his question, staring instead at a very betrayed-looking Ron standing in the doorway to the inside.

Charlie just taught me to Apparate illegally and we didn't offer to include him, Harry winced.

Harry watched as Ron sneered at him, rolled his eyes, and slammed his way back into the house.

"He'll get over it." Charlie said beside him, beginning to walk toward the house.

"He's right that I'm being a terrible friend." Harry replied resignedly.

"The war comes first. That's just the way it is. He needs to grow up and accept that." Charlie said.

"True." Harry said.

"And even so, a row between guys should never be this damn dramatic." Charlie said, laughing at he opened the door to the inside. Harry laughed and agreed, heading immediately toward the stairs to finish his fifth hour studying.

"He's killing people, Ron." Harry heard Ginny say clearly as he entered the kitchen. Harry froze, his breath catching in his throat.

Do I run? Harry thought immediately, wanting to scream at the thought. He couldn't lose the Weasleys, how was he supposed to survive that?

"Ron seriously, listen to this: The body of known Death-Eater Thorfinn Rowle was found beside an abandoned building in Diagon Alley at three o'clock this morning. Wizarding police are looking into the significance of the doll found at the scene of the crime, a muggle horse-shaped toy called a My Little Pony. The same doll was counted as evidence in an earlier case, though police are refusing to comment on whether or not we are faced with a so-called "serial

killer", a muggle term for murderers who-" Ginny was reading, leaning over the kitchen table to scan a newspaper flattened against it.

"What's this?" Charlie interrupted, walking past Harry into the kitchen.

I can't watch this. Harry thought, looking at Ginny's disgusted expression.

"A Death Eater was killed in Diagon Alley last night." Ginny answered.

"Oh, good." Charlie replied, walking over and bending over her shoulder to read.

"Thank you!" Ron said, sounding exasperated.

"This is murder, guys." Ginny said, glancing between the two.

"Of Death Eaters." Charlie said.

"Sounds simple to me." Ron shrugged.

They're not talking about me, Harry thought, seeing Ginny's eyes pass over him easily. Harry took a deep breath, clenching and releasing his shaking hands. Harry forced himself to walk casually into the living room and lean against the wall next to Fred and George, all listening to the conversation.

"This is murder, how do you not get that?" Ginny repeated, picking up the newspaper and pointing to a still photo of the body in Diagon Alley.

"Ginny, listen." Charlie said quietly, taking the newspaper from Ginny's hands and starting to fold it.

"It is murder." Ginny said, raising her eyebrows at him.

"I'm not arguing that but Ginny, multiple people in this house actively fight in this war, we don't want to talk about the ethics of it." Charlie said quietly.

"I'm not talking about that, I'm talking about whoever is going around London with creepy muggle dolls-" Ginny started.

"He's killing Death Eaters, Ginny. Is it all that different to kill someone in a battle as before or after it?"

"Yes." Ginny said simply.

"Honestly though, it's not a discussion I'd like to have, because if you are wrong I'd really prefer not to know." Charlie answered, slipping the folded newspaper back onto the table gently.

"Where's Mum?" George asked, changing the subject abruptly.

"She and Hermione went to get food," Ginny answered quickly, obviously taking the hint. "Apparently we'd just eaten through all of the vegetables she had."

"And that's a real shame." Fred said.

"Just think, we'd even finally run out of that beloved and nutritious pea soup that she made." George added, faking a sob and holding his hand over his heart.

"It pains me to think about it." Ginny exclaimed, mirroring George's stricken expression.

"Me too." Charlie and Harry replied at the same time, both sounding perfectly serious.

Harry laughed with the others, his voice coming out overly-loud and enthusiastic as he tried to relax into the constant friendly banter.

I could lose this if they find out. Harry thought, looking over the family.

I'd lose everything if I'm found out, He realized. He'd be on trial for murder whether the act was morally right or no.

Harry suddenly felt ill, and wanted out of the room. He walked toward the stairs quietly, and walked straight up toward Ron's attic room and sat down on his cot to think.

I was so sloppy, Harry wanted to shout. Anyone could have seen him. Anyone could have walked through that ward and killed him. It was luck. He wasn't supposed to be relying on luck anymore. He was supposed to be thinking things out, mastering magic and knowing what he was doing.

I'm not killing again until I learn everything I need to do it safely, Harry swore to himself, rubbing his fingers over his eyes.

Damn it, I have no idea how to go about this, he thought frustratedly, staring at how skinny and weak his hands and arms still looked. Seems like I'm stumbling from one mistake to another waiting to get caught, He thought, picturing how horrible it would have been if after saying 'he's killing people' Ginny had turned her disgusted expression toward him.

I have to get in, kill, and get out without being seen, heard, or stopped, Harry thought, throwing his brain and knowledge of magic into the problem. Invisibility and silencing spells were simple. He needed everything Bill had to teach him about the wards.

And I need to not be rash, Harry reminded himself yet again, running his hands through his hair. How many times was he going to go

rushing into action without any plan or thought at all?

I'll learn, Harry promised himself. I'll pay attention and I'll grow up and I'll learn.

"You alright, Harry?"

Harry looked up to see George leaning against the doorframe.

"You looked mighty sick when you rushed up here." George said.

"Yeah, yeah I'm good." Harry answered, getting up quickly.

"Ginny's conversation throw you?" George asked, backing out of the doorway to give Harry space to leave.

"Yeah, that and Charlie's response." Harry replied as he shrugged. George nodded and seemed to accept the answer, turning to follow Harry back downstairs.

~~HP~~

Author Weasley came home that night with Lupin, entering the house just as Harry and the twins were finishing setting the table for dinner.

"Harry, could I talk to you for a moment?" Mr. Weasley asked after greeting Mrs. Weasley in the kitchen.

"Of course." Harry answered, following the older man into the living room. Mr. Weasley gestured to a closed cardboard box that was sitting unobtrusively on the coffee table.

"These are yours, Harry. I'm not sure if you've been informed but Professor Dumbledore requested that I do a search for you, looking for all the items that Mundungus..well, that Mundungus stole from you." Mr. Weasley said, touching the box with a single finger.

## DISGUSTING EMOTIONLESS CRUEL

Harry stepped back quickly, almost falling up the steps back toward the kitchen. He wanted to get sick, the magic was terrible.

"Get away from that!" Harry called, feeling fear spike through his system as his eyes focused on Mr. Weasley's finger on the box, so close to whatever was inside.

Mr. Weasley obeyed quite quickly, lifting his hand away quickly and stepping back.

"Harry, you shouldn't be rude." Mr. Weasley chastised, turning from the box to face Harry fully. "I know Sirius was important to you but-" Mr. Weasley stopped speaking, clearly unsure what to say.

He thinks I didn't want him touching Sirius's stuff, Harry realized finally, the words then making sense.

"No, Mr. Weasley, that's not what I meant. There is something wrong with the magic in that box." Harry said lamely, trying to figure out words for the sick feeling against his magic.

"Dark magic?" Mr. Weasley said, looking concerned.

"Yeah." Harry answered, blinking.

Is that what 'Dark Magic' means? Harry thought, remembering all the texts he read that argued there was no such thing as good or evil magic. It was supposedly just prejudice, but Harry felt himself start to doubt that; there was something damn close to evil in that box.

"Mr. Weasley, step away please." Harry requested, remembering to take out his wand as he approached the box.

"Harry, no, if there is something dangerous in that box, leave it to Dumbledore." Mr. Weasley said immediately, though he did obey and step away.

Harry remembered Dumbledore's shriveled, decaying hand and paused, staring at the box.

"You handled all of this by hand?" Harry asked.

"Yes, I..I suppose I did.." Mr. Weasley answered, looking chastised himself then.

"Well that at least suggests whatever it is is not fast-acting, or doesn't react to human touch." Harry considered, wandlessly rising the strongest magic-containment spells he knew. Supposedly the spells should mask all of the signs of the magic within, as it provided a barrier between his magic and that of whatever was inside, but Harry could still feel the pulsing magic through his wards.

Is this too much for me to handle? Harry asked himself. He'd go in cautiously, he decided, making sure he was always prepared to simply continue layering containment ward after ward until he could no longer feel or touch the magic within.

Harry lifted the top of the box off with a flick of his wand and destroyed it with another. Unsurprisingly, the feel of the magic within didn't get stronger or weaker. The top of the box was just cardboard then, Harry concluded, it hadn't contained any of the magic within, and so he hadn't changed anything by removing it.

Harry approached the open box slowly, gesturing for Mr. Weasley to step back as he walked forward.

"Harry, if you are right that there is dark magic there, do not be rash. I highly believe you should leave it for Dumbledore." Mr. Weasley said, sounding like he was pleading.



"I may very well do that." Harry answered honestly before looking down in the box.

There was an entire set of plates that looked like pure silver stacked carefully into the box beside three mismatched silver goblets, a nasty-looking dagger and what appeared to be a carved glass ashtray holding a pair of earrings, a Black crest pendant, and a locket.

Locket, Harry remembered, feeling his eyes widen as he stared at the unassuming little thing.

A horcrux, brought to me this easily? It seemed too unlikely, too easy, Harry considered, making out the ornate S carved into the locket's surface.

Harry remembered the change that almost made him sick from the full feel of it and nodded to himself, biting his tongue between his front teeth. He had never felt such sickness in magic before, and he didn't want to try and feel the magic for as long as it would take to destroy the thing, and he certainly didn't want to fail.

I know nothing about destroying horcruxes, Harry reminded himself, looking up to stare at the opposite wall.

And I highly doubt a fully grown Basilisk is preparing to burst through this wall and bite through it for me, Harry thought, running a hand through his hair and looking back down at the necklace.

I shouldn't try to handle this, Harry thought resignedly,

God I hate that! Harry said, turning away from Mr. Weasley and the cardboard box to slam his hand into the wooden doorframe. He was studying to become useful and he was still failing to do anything but push tasks on to Dumbledore to handle.

But that doesn't mean I'm prepared to handle this, Harry said, cursing in his head as he rested his face on his outstretched arm and forced himself to calm down.

Dumbledore wasn't either, Harry realized suddenly, looking up and staring at the white painted wall in front of his face and picturing Dumbledore's decrepit, shriveled hand. Dumbledore had destroyed a horcrux, the ring he mentioned being 'dealt with'. Dumbledore hadn't kept himself safe somehow, and had suffered for it.

He'll die if he makes that same mistake twice, Harry knew.

I should handle this. Dumbledore said this is my battle. Harry decided suddenly, turning back to the box where the locket lay. He would find a way to destroy it.

Harry walked around Mr. Weasley to sit down in the coach behind the coffee table.

"I miss Sirius too, Harry. He was a good man." Mr. Weasley said softly.

He thinks I'm mourning Sirius now, Harry realized, glancing at the sad-looking man out of the corner of his eye, before concentrating back on the task in front of him.

He glanced around for something disposable and decided on one of the candies sitting in a ceramic bowl beside the couch. He took one quickly and hid it in a closed fist, pulling his rosewood wand into his hand in case Mr. Weasley was watching while he easily transfigured the treat into a small black jewelry case in his hand.

Harry pushed himself up from the couch in order and stared directly into the box of Sirius's old things, reaching his magic inside to feel for any magicked traps before he lifted his closed fist above the box and

dropped the jewelry case beside the thick silver goblets.

Harry sat back down on the couch and closed his eyes to focus entirely on his magic and the box in front of him, searching for any kind of spell or charm on the box or locket.

HATE DISGUST FUN BURN

Harry had to clench his teeth as the feeling of the horcrux's magic tried to overwhelm him.

This is what Voldemort's magic feels like? Harry wondered, swallowing quickly against his throats gagging and swearing that he'd never destroy himself so.

Unless it were necessary, Harry reminded himself, feeling almost faint at the thought, and the one that so quickly followed from it. Murder made horcruxes, Dumbledore had said. Was Harry already doing what he'd so quickly sworn he'd never do? Was his G.M.I magic going to feel like burn someday? Was winning the war worth that?

Yes, Harry remembered immediately. Winning the war was worth anything. He was only wavering because he was starting to know what that meant, Harry told himself. He'd get through it, and he'd give anything to win the war.

Harry bore down with his concentration and isolated the horcux's magic from the rest he felt covering the plates, goblets, and locket. There was nothing; the box was safe. Harry reached his magic into the box and flipped the jewelry case open with a simple flick of his wand, before levitating the locket into it, and flicking the tiny case closed.

Only then did he start casting his containment and protection spells, ensuring that no magic could touch the locket or case, and no magic

from the locket could reach outside the case. Only when he couldn't feel anything but his own or harmless spells coming from the cardboard box did he reach his hand inside it for the locket case.

"Harry!" Harry heard Mr. Weasley gasp, sounding simultaneously furious, disappointed and scared.

Harry pulled the jewelry box out and began concentrating on the strongest wandless protective spells he could do, layering even more over the small box even as he looked up to face the Weasley father's fury.

"I was safe, Mr. Weasley." Harry said, catching Mr. Weasley's eye. To his surprise, the older man only blinked a few times before bowing his head slightly.

"Very well." Mr. Weasley said lightly, reaching his hand out to cup Harry's shoulder gently and pat him once, before walking slowly back toward the kitchen.

"Author!" Harry heard a man call disapprovingly from inside of the room. Harry spun his head over and saw Lupin in the doorway from the front landing.

"I've learned to trust my children, Remus." Mr. Weasley replied. Harry turned his head to stare at the Weasley father. Harry'd always only thought of Mr. Weasley as the muggle-loving kind old man overpowered by Molly Weasley; he hadn't expected such care and respect from the man. He hadn't ever really talked to Mr. Weasley, Harry realized, feeling his respect for the father grow as a smile stretched across his face.

'My children', Harry repeated to himself, blinking rapidly. The Weasleys had always treated him like a family member, but to hear them actually announcing that now, using words like 'my' and 'son'...

Harry turned his eyes away as Mr. Weasley glanced at him, trying to hide his overwhelmed expression. Harry saw Mr. Weasley nod when he glanced back, and grinned in response. Mr. Weasley smiled, and turned away from them both to walk up the two steps into the kitchen, where the silencing spells swallowed the sound of his footsteps.

"That was very irresponsible, Harry." Lupin said immediately. "You had no way to know what the contents of that box were spelled with."

That would be 'charmed', spells are immediately active. Harry thought automatically, before pushing his thoughts to defend himself.

"I cast a detecting spell." He said, feeling his stomach drop at Lupin's scared and disappointed expression.

"Lupin, I wasn't irresponsible." Harry said, hating his pleading even as he did it.

"Harry, age aside, you are not even a fully trained wizard, you need to recognize that." Lupin said, walking into the room.

"Lupin-" Harry started, throwing his head back to stare at the ceiling.

"Remus." The ex-professor corrected.

"Right." Harry said to the ceiling.

Does that matter at all right after I supposedly stuck my hand into a box full of dark magic?

I'm never going to convince him that I actually somewhat know what I'm doing with magic, Harry thought, pulling his head back down to stare back into the older man's disappointed gaze.

"Remus, respect me a little." Harry pleaded, trying to keep his voice neutral.

"This isn't about respect Harry, it's about putting yourself in potentially extremely dangerous situations and foolishly risking your life with Dark Magics you can not handle!" Remus said, throwing his hand up through the air as his voice became angry.

"Oh, like Dumbledore did, in other words." Harry snarked, before wincing to himself. That wasn't how he wanted to respond while he was demanding respect.

"I didn't do anything I could not handle." Harry revised, gesturing to the cardboard box with his free hand, the other still occupied strengthening the wards around the locket.

"You have no idea what you can and cannot handle!" Lupin exclaimed, copying his gesture at the box.

"You are scolding me like a child, Remus." Harry pointed out, feeling his face contort into a grimace at his words.

"You are a teenager, Harry. It's time you get treated as one." Lupin said, shaking his head.

"No, Remus, actually it's too late to treat me as one." Harry replied, letting images of his past few years flash through his mind-- Quirrell's burning face, the flash of green that killed Cedric, Cedric's dead body after, the raids, Voldemort speaking to him as 'the spy', 'Thorfinn Rowle' dead beside a ceramic toilet and empty bottles of butterbeer-- by the time he'd pulled his mind from the memories, Lupin was speaking again.

"You need to grow up, Harry." Lupin said, sounding almost apologetic.

"No, you need to realize that I already have." Harry ordered back, glad to hear the strength back in his voice.

"Let's go set the table for dinner." Lupin said neutrally, walking toward the kitchen.

"It's already done." Harry replied, though he entered the kitchen in front of Lupin all the same, already searching for the older Weasley sons who made such better company to pass the hours when he could not study.

~~HP~~

The next morning Harry descended into the kitchen to find the entire household in a frenzy decorating, cooking, and cleaning to prepare for Christmas day.

He didn't like what that meant for him at all, Harry thought as he watched Mrs. Weasley rushing into the living room, shouting for Bill to cancel the heating spell on the bread dough.

No one would question if Harry left. The family would think he'd gone shopping. He knew how to floo to Hogsmeade. He could walk to the forest, and Jugson's obituary was written by a Garius Gibbon, a name Harry knew he'd heard called out in the raids. Harry knew he was running through the few names of Death Eaters he'd seen killing, but for the moment it didn't matter, he remembered Gibbon and he could get to him.

So I'm supposed to murder on Christmas Eve? Harry wondered, staring wide-eyed out of the kitchen window Ron was scrubbing angrily.

He had no excuse, he had the time and he was meant to use it.

There are many ways I need to use my time, Harry remembered, grabbing onto the thought like a lifeline.

"Bill." Harry called, even hearing how desperate his voice came out as he saw Bill cross the kitchen and spell Ron's window clean for him.

"Thanks." Ron mumbled at Bill, throwing his dirty rag onto the kitchen table before glaring at Harry and heading toward the steps.

"No worries." Bill answered, evidently ignoring Ron's spoiled attitude as headed toward the fruitbasked on the countertop and grabbed an



apple.

"What's up, Harry?" He asked.

"Teach me how to counter warding." Harry ordered, trying not to bounce up and down on his toes in his eagerness to start doing something while he wasted his opportunity to rid the world of another wizarding killer.

"I have to-" Bill started before catching Harry's gaze and letting his sentence die. "Right, sure." Bill revised, casting a cancellation spell toward the bread dough rising beside the stove, throwing his apple back into the basket and turning toward the kitchen side door. "Let's go to the orchard."

~~HP~~

"The most important thing about wards is that they are subjective spells; they depend on the emotions and thought you put into them just like any Patronus or Unforgivable. In order to create them a wizard must put his concentration and mind into feeling and wanting protection of whatever sort the ward gives. So, coming logically off of this, in order to break one down one must concentrate on feeling and wanting to either get at whatever is within the ward or simply focus on the will to destroy that protection. This is why Gringott's vaults are very secure; Goblins care about protecting money more than we can ever care to want it. We don't want money for money's sake, we want power or the health of our family or whatever money can bring, and that gets in the way of our focus. Goblins want to protect money for money's sake, and it's a mentality we can't quite understand and we certainly can't fully reproduce." Bill started, sitting on the same stump he'd chosen last time they'd spoken at the back of the Orchard.

Harry decided not to say that he'd learned all of that before; he'd asked Bill to teach him and he didn't want Bill to start skipping over things he hadn't already learned.

I want this to take a long time anyway, Harry reminded himself, forcefully relaxing his shoulders.

"I'm guessing that I'm just repeating what you already know at the moment but bear with me. Now the best technique for breaking down a ward is to go through what we at work call the 'keyhole'. I believe it's actually called the Subjective Provisional Acceptance Clause or some such, but screw that." Bill said.

Subjective Provisional Established Admittance Clause, Harry corrected silently as Bill pointed his wand at a rock and went still and silent for a moment.

Venter Alatus, Harry thought, recognizing the ward as it was strengthened around the stone.

"Alright, so in order to set up a ward that anyone is able to get through, whether that be the casting wizard or his entire family, one needs to make a keyhole, a part of the magic that designates who is allowed in. The good part for us is, it's a necessary weakness in the warding. Focus on the keyhole when your shoving your concentration at the ward, and you'll do better. Now the wandmotion is a common helix and flick, and the best wardbreaker's spell, across the board, is Alohomora, believe it or not. The only thing that makes the spell more or less effective is whether or not a wizard finds the keyhole, and how much he is able to concentrate on both the subjective intention and the casting at the same time." Bill said before demonstrating the spell by casting it on the rock and forcing his magic through his own ward.

"Right, so I know you know how to use magical detection spells. What I want you to do is feel this ward, find its keyhole, and break through it. Remember to take out your wand just in case anyone from the house is watching." Bill ordered before silently recasting the Venter Alatus ward.

Harry obeyed, slipping the rosewood into his hand before he shifted his attention to the ward that felt like strength and soft to find the magic that allowed only Bill access to the stone.

"Why did you ask me to teach you to break down wards if you already knew how?" Bill asked, chuckling as Harry leaned down and picked up the stone minutes later.

"I felt while you did it. I couldn't do that from a book, it was taking me forever." Harry explained, tossing him the rock. Bill caught it one-handed and shook his head.

"You learn creepy fast, mate." Bill said, setting the stone down on the ground.

"Why don't you try going through the keyhole, rather than breaking it?" Harry asked, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

"Sorry?" Bill asked, furrowing his eyebrows quickly.

"Going through it, like making your own magic resemble what the keyhole is allowing, rather than just using the weakness of that point to smash the entire ward. I couldn't find any textbooks that would explain why one shouldn't do that. Is it illegal for some reason?" Harry asked.

"Well I can tell you that it's not illegal, because I know essentially all of the international law concerning wards, and only international law would keep a book from publishing that kind of thing, and being as how I still have no idea what you're talking about, I doubt it's written into those laws." Bill answered, opening his palms to the air.

"Alright, look," Harry started, picking up the large stone again and balancing it over his palm. "we make a ward over this that says only you and Charlie can get in. Well in magical terms, that refers to your

magical signatures, what you feel like in the magic, which is cast in that same subjective manner. The wizard thinks of the people allowed in the Subjective Provisional Established Admittance Clause, and the way they think of them naturally ties into their magical signature, even if they are only thinking about blood-relatives of the family in general. So I know I can't change what magical signatures the clause accepts, but if I can change the feel of my own magic to resemble that of the ward, shouldn't I be able to just walk through?" Harry asked.

"That would work but one can't change one's own magical signature, Harry. It's why Gringott's vaults can work at all, not to mention Ministry signatures." Bill argued.

"Why is it impossible to change one's own signature? We're able to spell some magical plants to change their G.M.I magic's properties. One should be able to shape the magic within oneself the same way, right?" Harry thought, thinking back to the potion's class in fourth year when they'd spelled some kind of fibrous root to make it less potent before they mixed it in. His potion had exploded as soon as he'd put the root in, but in theory the spell should have worked. According to Snape anyway, and if nothing else, the man seemed to know his potions.

"Quite honestly, you've lost me." Bill said, standing up. "Quite frankly I've been taught that one can not change one's own magical signature and that's all I know."

"Alright." Harry answered, standing up to join Bill in walking back to the house.

"Owl-ordered packages arrived for you, by the way. Mum put them in your room, though I think Ron is sulking in there at the moment."

"Alright, thanks." Harry replied, deciding to same-day owl-order some books on magical signatures too. In theory one should be able to

change a magical signature, but how? He had something he had to learn again; Gibbon could wait until after Christmas.

~~HP~~

Christmas morning found Harry finishing his first book on magical signatures. His two-hour alarm rang, telling him to take a break, just as he heard Ron turn off the water in the bathroom. Ron was always the last to shower, which meant the entire household was awake.

Perfect timing.

Harry sat up from his made bed, having woken and showered right after Charlie did, both of them up as always before the sun. Now, however, there was a bulging bright-red stocking lying over the end of his bed that hadn't been there before.

Christmas, Harry remembered, running a hand through his hair. He felt like he'd forgotten that something as simple and happy as Christmas at the Burrow could still happen despite Diagon Alley being in shambles and the Ministry searching that alleyway for clues of Rowle's death.

"Come on, Harry, Ron's finally up, it's Christmas!" Harry heard Ginny shout from downstairs.

"Coming!" Harry shouted back, grabbing the stocking and bringing it downstairs.

The Weasleys, Fleur, and Lupin were already gathered in the living room, spread over the couches and chairs, all facing the large Christmas tree that Fred and George had decorated with dazzling spells and a stupefied, painted gold garden gnome dressed in a miniature tutu.

Harry entered through the kitchen and saw Ron quite-obviously

move over to make sure there wasn't space on the couch for him. Harry resisted rolling his eyes and sat instead beside Fleur, who had cuddled up to Bill obligingly.

"Thanks, Harry." Bill whispered with a wink, earning a gentle hit from Fleur.

"Well then!" Mrs. Weasley said loudly, obviously attempting to smile and glare at Fleur at the same time and finally settling on smiling at Harry instead.

Harry's presents included a soft package from Mrs. Weasley, a large box from the twins, and a slightly damp, moldy-selling package that came with a label reading To Master, From Kreacher.

Harry started opening his presents as slowly as he could to make sure that he was not the first to finish unwrapping, despite his smaller pile. He grabbed the box from Fred and George first, and found a collection of Weasley Wizard Wheezes that Mrs. Weasley glared at out of the corner of her eye. Harry thanked them with a grin and moved on quickly, hoping Mrs. Weasley wouldn't start up a rant about the pranks. He left the gift from Kreacher for the end, unsure he wanted to open that in public at all.

"Oh she's beautiful, Harry." Harry heard Ginny gush and looked up from unwrapping his annual hand-knit sweater to see Ginny holding her gift out on one arm – a proud brown Great Horned Owl.

"He," Harry corrected, smiling at the bird. "According to the Emporium he's unnamed, so take your pick." He added.

"Marius." Ginny answered almost immediately, stroking the bird's neck with a finger. "Do you like Marius too?" She asked the bird, which blinked slowly in response.

"I'm going to take that as a resounding and enthusiastic 'yes'." Ginny

grinned, drawing her hand down the owl's back.

"Hippogriff's horn, Harry, this is awesome." She said, grinning at him.

"Ginny!" Mrs. Weasley scolded. "Language."

"Sorry, Mum." Ginny said automatically.

"Merlin Harry." Fred and George said at the same time, staring over their gift of assorted barely-legal magical substances owl-ordered from Borgin and Burkes.

"I'm saying the same." Said Charlie, running a hand over his new copy of one of the lower-level research books Harry had enjoyed the most.

"Oh, Harry, this is wonderful." Mrs. Weasley said, smelling the perfume Harry had gotten her.

"Merry Christmas." Harry replied, wishing the room's attention would shift somewhere else.

"Thank you, Harry." Mr. Weasley said calmly, smiling and holding up the good set of robes he'd unwrapped.

"Thank you!" The rest chorused.

"Yeah, thanks." Ron grumbled a second too late, holding the quality set of Quidditch balls Harry'd gotten him.

"Your welcome, thank you all. Merry Christmas." Harry said, running a hand over the soft Golden Snitch on the sweater he had open on his lap.

"Merry Christmas!" They chorused happily, grinning at each other.

"Harry, you've still got one." Fred said, pointing at Kreacher's gift. Harry winced.

"I'm guessing it's going to be nasty. I think I should open it outside, at the very least." Harry said honestly.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous, that's what cleaning spells are for." Mrs. Weasley exclaimed, batting a hand at him.

"Alright." Harry said dubiously as he carefully pulled up on the top of the box, unsure what to expect beyond the containment wards he could feel off the thing.

"Ugh!" Harry grunted as maggots started overflowing out of the package. Harry tore out his wand and cast a quick cancelling spell at the maggots, only to see them continue flowing onto the floor.

House-elf magic, Harry realized, feeling the foreign magic scrape against his own and deciding he didn't have time to puzzle it out.

Harry grabbed the top and crushed it back onto the box, mashing a few maggots in half in the process.

"Cleaning spell is right." Ginny said from where she sat leaning away from the wriggling pile of maggots still on the floor.

"Yeah." Harry said, spelling away the disgusting creatures.

"Well, that was thoughtful." Mr. Weasley said, smiling slightly.

"Ow 'orrible." Said Fleur with a small shudder before burying her face in Bill's neck.

"Thanks, Harry." Bill said with another grin and a wink.

"Anytime." Harry replied, grinning back.



"Yeah, please don't." Ginny replied, grimacing at the damp box on the floor.

"Kreacher." Harry ordered, standing up from the couch.

The house-elf arrived, looking bitterly around the room before focusing a very smug-looking expression at Harry.

"Merry Christmas." Harry said, handing the house-elf a box of chocolates from his robe pocket.

"Master is a mud-blood to give gifts to house-elves." Kreacher sneered.

"Indeed." Harry answered, ignoring the Weasley's offended gasps and focusing on Kreacher's surprised and pleased expression as he took the gift.

"Is that all you called for, Mudblood Master?" Kreacher asked almost politely.

"Yes, you may go. Merry Christmas." Harry replied.

Kreacher cracked away, mumbling something that sounded like "mud-bloods" and "Christmas".

"You give him a gift after that?" Ron scoffed.

"Yes." Harry answered simply, sitting back down.

"That was very generous, Harry." Remus said.

Condescending, Harry identified, nodding politely at the man.

~~HP~~

"Merlin's cuticles, that's awesome!" Ginny said out of the blue during the Christmas lunch, banging the table slightly.

"I just realized Tonk's patronus changed it's form! It was a badger before, right, but when she showed it to us this summer it was entirely different. I hadn't even noticed." She explained, blushing slightly.

"Someone's patronus can change?" Ron said through a mouthful of turkey.

"Apparently." Ginny said, sounding triumphant then.

"What'd it change to?" Charlie asked, frowning slightly at Ron.

"I don't know, some big four-legged wolf thing. It was too big to be a wolf though. A sphynx maybe? No..." Ginny rambled, staring up at the ceiling as she thought.

Harry looked over at Lupin, surprised the man hadn't jumped into the conversation, to see the ex-professor obviously taking his time chewing and pretending to ignore the conversation. He was blushing though, Harry noticed.

"Do you think it could be-" Harry started, watching Lupin carefully.

"Arthur!" said Mrs. Weasley suddenly, standing up from her chair and pressing a hand to her chest as she stared out of the kitchen window. "Arthus – it's Percy!"

"What?" Harry heard one of the twins exclaim as they all turned their attention to the window to watch Percy Weasley striding up the front path, followed closely by the new Minister Harry had seen in the Daily Prophet. Scrimgeour was limping slightly through the snow, looking exhausted. Before Mr. and Mrs. Weasley could do more than

exchange stunned looks, the back door opened and Percy stood, gesturing the Minister inside.

Maybe he should have knocked, Harry thought, seeing all of the Weasley's shocked looks and practically feeling the painful silence.

"Merry Christmas, Mother." Percy said stiffly.

"Oh, Percy!" Mrs. Weasley yelled, throwing herself away from the table to wrap him into a hug.

Harry watched Rufus Scrimgeour pause in the doorway, obviously feeling awkward leaning on his walking stick, blocking the side door.

"You must forgive this intrusion," he said, when Mrs. Weasley looked around at him, beaming and wiping her eyes. "Percy and I were in the vicinity – working, you know – and he couldn't resist dropping in and seeing you all."

Harry felt his upperlip start to rise at the thick lie, looking at where Percy stood, poker-straight and awkward looking surrounded by the Weasleys as they rose from the table to gather around him.

Mr. Weasley walked around the Minister, stony faced as he reached for the side door and shut it quietly.

"Oh yes, close the door, close the door," Mrs. Weasley gushed happily, waving her hand at her husband happily. "Have a little purkey, or some tooding...I mean-"

"No, no, my dear Molly," said Scrimgeour. "I don't want to intrude, wouldn't be here at all if Percy hadn't wanted to see you all so badly..."

"Oh, Perce!" said Mrs. Weasley tearfully, reaching up to kiss him.

"...We've only looked in for five minutes, so I'll have a stroll around the yard while you catch up with Percy. No, no, I assure you I don't want to butt in! Well, if anybody cared to show me your charming garden...Ah, that young man's finished, why doesn't he take a stroll with me?" Scrimgeour said, all smiles as he gestured to Harry.

The atmosphere around the room changed perceptibly. Everybody looked from Scrimgeour to Harry, all offended by the blatant pretense.

"Sure." Harry said lightly, cleaning his mouth with his napkin carefully before placing it beside his fork and standing up.

"It's fine." Harry said quietly as he passed Lupin, who had half risen from his chair. "Fine," he repeated firmly as Mr. Weasley opened his mouth to speak.

"Wonderful!" said Scrimgeour, standing back to let Harry pass through the door ahead of him. "We'll just take a turn around the garden, and Percy and I'll be off. Carry on, everyone!"

Harry stopped just outside the closed side-door, letting Scrimgeour limp around in front of him on his own.

"You came to speak with me." Harry said firmly.

"Well, yes." Scrimgeour said, blushing slightly. "I daresay that whole debacle was badly done, but do understand, I have been hoping for an occasion to talk to you ever since I gained office." He said, gesturing toward the inside of the Weasley home.

Harry kept his face expressionless and stared into the smiling face of the Minister.

"Minister, let me get something straight with you," Harry said, hoping his anger showed in his eyes as he kept his face stony.

"I realize that Dumbledore has been blocking your letters, however you just came, bringing pain in your wake as an excuse to visit, on Christmas Day, uninvited, into this home, for a political meeting with me that was neither solicited or accepted." Harry spat out, watching the Minister's wrinkled face look more and more frustrated and embarrassed.

"Well, I didn't think that-" Scrimgeour started.

"You will send me a letter, requesting a meeting at a certain time and place, and I will either accept or refuse it, and you will respect the decision I have made and the privacy that I demand." Harry ordered, interrupting the Minister immediately.

"Until that time, I will not listen to a single word of what you think. Good day, Minister. I'll tell the family of your departure, and of your chagrin that you did not have the time to say goodbye. Merry Christmas." Harry said, keeping his face emotionless even as he wondered if Scrimgeour's eyebrows could raise any more without becoming permanently fused to his hairline.

"Sorry-, I-, my word-, Dumbledore-, no-, excuse me but-, I thought-"

Harry waited silently while Scrimgeour sputtered.

"Merry Christmas, Mr. Potter. I apologize for the intrusion. Please tell Percy I shall be glad to meet with him after the holidays." The Minister said finally, gathering himself together.

"Thank you, sir." Harry replied, and watched as Scrimgeour awkwardly turned his back, and began his limping trek through the snow to the cleared front path.

"Percy." Harry called when he walked back inside and saw the older boy standing stiffly in the living room, surrounded by chattering

Weasleys.

Percy nodded sharply at him and squared his shoulders before strutting cafully into the kitcen.

"Merry Christmas." Harry said, handing Percy the unwrapped gift he still had in his robes pocket. "I was going to send this, so it's not wrapped." He explained as he handed Percy the book.

"Thank you very much." Percy said, enunciating perfectly and nodding again as he took the gift.

Harry stepped back and leaned against the cabinet behind him, giving Percy space as he read the title and flipped the book over to read its description.

The book was called A Brother's War, and supposedly described how the muggle Civil War in the United States tore apart families as men were forced to declare their loyalties.

Harry watched Percy's eyes close slowly as the boy composed himself.

"Thank you, Harry." Percy said softly, catching Harry's gaze for a moment before nodding sharply again, his nerves visibly frayed.

"You're welcome." Harry answered calmly, immensely glad he'd thought to get the book.

"And Minister Scrimgeour?" asked Percy suddenly, frantically glancing about the room.

"He had to go. He said he'd meet with you after the holidays," Harry replied. "You staying for dinner?"

Harry heard conversation pause as seemingly the entire room

quieted to hear the answer. Percy looked down at the book quietly and pulled his head back up to scan the room. Seven Weasleys stood awkwardly, staring at him and waiting.

"Why, of course he will, it's Christmas!" Mrs. Weasley said out of the silence, all smiles.

The entire room was still waiting though, Harry noted, wishing he'd asked Percy more quietly.

"No, thank you." Percy said finally, his frown firm on his face.

"Percy, do this." Harry whispered. "You're losing them."

"I need to follow the Minister." Percy said loudly enough for the room to hear, his head held high.

"You can do that after dinner." Mrs. Weasley argued with a smile, though her eyes were watering.

"Can I?" Percy asked, staring aggressively at their faces one by one.

"Yes, you can." Bill said firmly, glancing a warning at Ron and the twins in turn.

"Then what's for dinner?" Percy asked, a smile rising and disappearing almost too quickly to notice.

Mrs. Weasley screamed in delight and threw herself back into her son's arms, kissing Percy's face and looking like she was about to cry.

~~HP~~

Harry slipped out shortly later, walking to the end of the orchard where he and Bill had spoken the day before. He'd practiced feeling

and shifting his magical signature in his room, and he thought he had that figured out. All he needed now was to learn how to identify what a ward's keyhole was accepting, and shifting himself into what it was looking for, and he wanted to stay outside so the family could be with Percy in their own time.

Harry stopped three hours later, still unsuccessful but knowing his five hours of studying for the day had been exhausted.

Still, Pomfrey had ordered that he could start exercising a half-hour a day after Christmas, and for two more minutes for every day after that, Harry remembered, stripping off his robes to stretch in his normal slacks and shirt before he set off at a run across the orchard. He could stay outside, and he could push himself again.

Harry grinned as cold wind whipped into his hair as he reached the hill that led down from the Weasley's home and started down it. His shirt pulled backwards, and Harry forced his legs faster. He was too skinny and too weak; he needed to build his body to fight in the Room of Requirement despite his weeks in the infirmary.

Harry hit the bottom of the hill and dropped himself on hands and knees, starting to do push-ups immediately, practically hearing Moody's shouting at him as the gravel bit into his palms. He jumped up after twenty push-ups and started up the hill again, loving the constricted, burning feel that was starting in his chest, knowing full well he'd barely be able to breathe by the time he finished. He was pushing himself again, he was improving again, all he had to do now was follow Pomfrey's instructions to the letter, and he'd become a weapon in the war like any other wizard in the Order.

Harry stopped immediately when his half-hour ended, walking in circles to cool himself down. He could feel the blood pumping through his entire body, too strong and far too hot, but he was grinning all the same, letting his breath come out in pants that made hot clouds in the December air. Harry walked back up the hill finally



and stopped at the top to stretch before he walked back to the Weasleys to grab his robes and take a shower.

~~HP~~

"Hell, Harry, what happened to you?" Remus asked, standing up from the kitchen table when Harry came in through the side door.

"Exercise." Harry answered, carrying his robes and heading toward the stairs.

"Hippogriff's horn, Harry, you look like shit." Ginny said as she walked into the kitchen, following her mother.

"GINEVRA!" Mrs. Weasley shouted, turning from the sink to glare.

"Whoops." Ginny said, grimacing at her mother.

"Yeah, seriously Ginny, Hippogriffs don't even have horns." Bill said as he entered the room with Charlie and Percy.

"They don't?" Ginny gasped, turning her head toward him.

"Don't think so." Bill said, winking.

"How do you know?" Ginny asked, mischief sparkling in her eyes. Bill winced at her question.

"Just guessing, just guessing!" Bill said, holding up his hands in surrender.

"You didn't check?" Ginny asked, sounding perfectly serious.

"No, Charlie told me. I tend to trust him." Bill said, grinning at Charlie.

"Yes, Charlie is a er...reputable source for such things, isn't he?"

Ginny replied in a sweet tone, smiling at Charlie.

"Hey now, -" Charlie started, grinning.

"Enough, enough!" Mrs. Weasley ordered, holding up her hands and blushing furiously.

"It's actually quite an interesting question." Percy announced in a lofty tone, holding his head high. Harry saw Charlie wince, and mirrored the action, knowing no one in the house was going to take that tone well.

"Taking the definition of 'horn' to be a hard, pointed object protruding from an animal's body, clearly hippogriff's have no such...extension in their anatomy. The question clearly then becomes, why is it that to say, as Ginevra has just done, 'hippogriff's horn', is considered an expletive, and even moreso why it is considered so inappropriate, if indeed it corresponds to no truly inappropriate or even existing subject in reality." Percy finished, looking smug.

Harry found himself grinning, and watched as the other Weasley children slowly came to realize that Percy had added to the joke, and further had done so intentionally.

"Really, Mother, Perce has a good point." Charlie said, breaking the silence that was quickly approaching awkwardness.

"Indeed, personally I can't even fathom a good answer to it." Fred said, staring at Percy with pride in his eyes.

"Do you know, Mother?" George asked, turning toward Mrs. Weasley with a grin. " Surely 'hippogriff's horn' is a polite exclamation, like 'Merlin's cuticles', since as Perce there said, hippogriffs have no such long protrusion."

"Not necessarily long, it could be a little horn." Ginny corrected,

keeping her innocent tone that Harry didn't believe for a second.

"Oh, I don't think the size would matter that much, Ginny." Bill replied.

"Don't you?" Ginny asked saucily, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Do you really want to know?" Bill returned, raising an eyebrow back at her.

"Okay, okay, enough. Everyone but Harry, please set the table. Harry, go shower, you're stinking up my kitchen." Mrs. Weasley ordered, waving her hands forward and evidently ignoring the blush blooming over her face.

"Harry." Remus started as Harry turned to leave.

"You still haven't found your wand, have you?" The man said unexpectedly.

I did lie to him about that, Harry remembered, feeling his true wand heavy strapped to his left arm. where he always had it.

"Remus, in any case that is my concern." Harry said quietly, turning back to face the werewolf fully.

He's going to scold me again, Harry identified, wanting to tear out his hair.

"Harry," Remus said again, leaning his elbows on his knees and shaking his head back and forth.

"Remus, I'm handling it." Harry said firmly, hating Remus's honest face that showed so much fear for him and so much damn disappointment.

The entire room had gone silent, Harry heard, wanting to yell at

Remus for starting his disappointed speech just as the house was returning to its normal cheer.

"Harry, you did not handle it well this year. You almost died. The entire Order was in uproar, no one saw it coming and suddenly you were laid out emaciated and-" Remus's voice cracked and the man visibly composed himself, shaking his head back and forth and clearing his throat. "You were just exercising again?"

"I was following Madam Pomfrey's orders." Harry replied, lifting his eyebrows at the man.

"Harry, this is no way to honor your parent's sacrifice." He said quietly.

Harry annoyance roar up in his chest.

"Remus, you used that line before, I acted foolishly so I dishonored my parent's sacrifice. Fuck you."

Harry felt his eyes widen at his own words.

Think, Then speak.

"I do what I need to. Right now, I need to be able to fight. I said that before. Madam Pomfrey understands that, and gave me a schedule to follow based on that. If you have a problem with it, take it up with her. At the very least, take it up with me in private and leave the story of my parent's death out of it." Harry said firmly, staring into Remus's still-shocked expression before turning his back and walking up the stairs.

Why do care so damn much? Harry asked himself as he threw his robes onto his cot and headed toward the bathroom. Harry threw open the bathroom door and winced as it slammed against the wall.

It doesn't matter if I care or not, Harry realized suddenly, feeling as if he was only then remembering the war and the raids. It didn't matter whether Remus began to respect or began to hate him if it didn't affect the war. It didn't matter if Harry didn't care or that he wanted to tear apart the house in his anger, if it didn't affect the war. Harry felt the thought travel through his body, relaxing all of his muscles. Something had broken in his relationship with Remus, he wanted to scream and cry about it, about everything he was losing to the war already, but it didn't matter. There was serenity in that, he thought.

Harry wondered just then if something inside of him needed the war a little.

He had to remind himself that no matter how terrifying that thought was, it didn't matter. Harry snorted at the irony in that, and stripped off his sweaty clothing to step into the shower.

Hellos!, a thousand apologies for the late update. I haven't been in my apartment for more than an hour for the last three weeks if you can imagine, and its all pushed this update pretty late. In any case, I'm here, and chapter's done:

~~HP~~

Killing Gibbon went according to plan. Harry was sitting invisible beside the Death Eater's wards by four in the morning, finding almost all of the wards' keyholes, when Gibbon left through his front door, singing quietly to himself as he went.

"Oh come and stir my cauldron,

and if you do it right,

I'll boil you up some hot strong love

to keep you warm tonight."

Revenge might not seem sweet, Harry thought as he watched the disgusting man fall and began casting a My-Little-Pony, but at least it is surprisingly easy.ke

Harry went back to the Weasley's immediately and snuck into his bed, doing his best not to wake Ron so his alibi of staying the night was complete. Ron kept snoring and Harry nodded to himself as he went to sleep, only wishing he had dared to wash his clean hands in the sink before he'd climbed into his cot. It seemed cliché, and almost silly in its foolishness, but his hands felt sticky even though he could feel that they weren't.

My hands are dirty now, Harry thought, staring up at the dark ceiling and lifting a hand over his face to study his well-kept and clean nails that he knew were starting to drip with blood.

When is this going to end? Harry wondered, thinking over the men he'd so literally stopped. There were thousands of Death Eaters. Was he going to kill each one himself? Why did he dread the thought?

He was glad they were dead, glad that he'd been able to do it. He didn't regret anything, so what was he feeling?

I'm just scared of what I'll become in this, Harry explained to himself, pulling his hand back down to his side.

I'll become whatever I need to be, Harry told himself. He was done feeling anything about that, it didn't matter what he felt and he didn't want to think about it. He'd do what was necessary until nothing more needed doing.

Still, he wished he'd cleaned his hands in the sink.

~~HP~~

Harry woke up to see Hedwig perched on the end of his bed, staring at him.

"Hey Beautiful," Harry greeted, sitting up and carefully untying the official-looking letter from her leg.

Hedwig hooted and flew over to the owl-stand where Pigwidgeon was sleeping. Hedwig glared at the smaller owl dolefully before clipping her beak once, as if threatening the sleeping animal that it shouldn't dare wake up and start making noise.

"What do you want to bet this is Scrimgeour begging?" Harry asked her rhetorically, flipping the letter over and slitting it open quickly with a finger.

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Dear Mr. Potter,

First, let me apologize again for my untimely intrusion upon the home of your hosts, and I beg your indulgence in passing my apology on to the Weasley family.

I understand that the predecessor to my office did nothing to promote a political relationship with you Mr. Potter, but I'm afraid in times of war even the most strained of friendships must on occasion be pushed further.

I'd like to request an audience with you at the Still-Glowing Wand, if you would be willing to meet me there for tea at three o'clock on the second of January. It would be my wish to continue onward from there to the Ministry building, for reasons which I would of course divulge fully over tea.

I appreciate you taking your valuable time to consider my offer,

Sincerely,

Rufus Scrimgeour

Minister of Magic

Owl Office 317

Floo Office 316

.

Sounds respectful at least, Harry thought as he finished the letter and leaned forward to lean on his knees as he read it again.

'Your valuable time', is he mocking me as a Hogwarts' student?,



Harry wondered, drawing a thumb under the words.

Does it matter?, Harry considered. He'd started a pissing contest with the Minister, the man was going to try and get his upper hand in the conversation back.

Should I refuse his offer? Change the date or time? Simply agree? Show up without having written back at all?

Harry sighed and dropped the letter into his warded trunk. He'd answer the letter when he figured out if he wanted a 'political relationship' with the Minister in any case.

~~HP~~

The Order meeting was badly scheduled, Harry thought immediately when he saw the wizards stumbling in later that day, almost all of them still red-eyed and looking ill from their Christmas celebrations.

They should have considered the meeting more important than drinking in any case, Harry thought, watching even Lupin walking heavily into the living room where the meeting was set to take place. The children of the house were ordered to stay out of the silencing wards, though Harry had no such inclination. He waited invisible until Tonks was going through, glad to see the clumsy woman sober at least, and grabbed her shirt-tail, letting her drag him through the ward's keyhole as a 'guest'. Permanently guest-allowing keyholes were probably always a bad idea, Harry noted as he found himself on the side of the settling crowd.

Harry cast wandless aversion wards around himself to keep anyone from noticing while he stripped off his invisibility cloak and 'appeared' in the room. He cancelled them immediately, knowing that as soon as Moody entered a single man among many would be far less noticeable than any protection ward in the open room.

Harry winked slowly at Charlie as the man entered and almost immediately noticed him. Charlie nodded slowly, looking elsewhere as he casually walked over and stood slightly in front of Harry, blocking him even more from the room.

Harry wasn't sure if Bill, Fred, and George simply joined Charlie because they always stood together, or if they knew that they were helping to hide him. By the time the room settled though, Fred was leaning against the wall just next to him, staring out at Dumbledore as if he didn't know anything was amiss in the room, and Harry had his answer.

"Well, then, I apologize for cutting into all of your vacations. I do hope they are going splendidly" Dumbledore started with a slight smile, glancing lightly around the room.

"Let us start with good news, as is always preferable. As some of you may already know, we have come upon concrete information that the Dark Lord believes our numbers to be in the four thousands."

Not anymore, Harry thought, looking around the spy-riddled room as everyone chuckled.

Why are they laughing? Harry wondered, watching a young-looking wizard grin proudly at the news.

"How many members does the Order actually have?" Harry whispered under his breath without shifting his gaze.

"Count." Fred answered from beside him.

"This is it?" Harry asked, feeling a jolt of fear pass through him as he glanced around the Weasley's living room. The room had been expanded, but not by that much. There couldn't be more than a hundred wizards there.

None of the Weasleys replied. It was better as a rhetorical question, Harry figured, staring out at the crowded room. There was nothing more to say. The Weasleys were all doing their best, and they all knew it wasn't going to be good enough.

I could learn the name of every member of Dumbledore's Order, Harry considered, wanting to slam himself back into his books and return to his murders. The raids were continuing, the Ministry wasn't able to stop them, the Order was relying on a child savior and an elderly commander, and no one else as fighting. Who was going to stop the next Death Eater bastard who pulled a mother from her child? No one had stopped the last one.

Dumbledore this isn't good enough and you know it. Are you thinking I'll kill Voldemort and let the Death Eater scum sink into the woodwork? Is that your plan? You'll let the Ministry stay corrupted? Do nothing for the raids on muggle towns? Rely on me? Let all of this happen again? Are you blind?

Harry kept silent, biting his tongue to keep from scoffing and cursing as the meeting went on.

Finally Moody brought out the maps, laying them one by one over the enlarged living room coffee table.

Harry memorized them. A year before he hadn't been able to remember even a day's homework for any useful amount of time.

All it took was practice, all anything took was practice, Harry thought, watching Moody busily run his thick tongue over his teeth as the crippled man looked over the maps of troop positions. Harry almost felt proud of Moody, glancing around the room. Moody was the only true soldier there, it seemed.

By the time the meeting was over and people started to shuffle out, Harry knew where the Order was fighting, how many people were

there, and what supplies were needed. Other than location it didn't tell him much that he didn't know; the Order needed more fighters, more money, more information, and more supplies.

"Harry." Dumbledore called as Harry was sliding out, surrounded by Weasleys.

Harry froze, watching as Mr. Weasley's eyes widened at the sight of him.

"Harry this was a private meeting!" Mr. Weasley scolded, sounding and looking betrayed.

"Let him be, Arthur. I just have a question to ask of him." Dumbledore ordered. Mr. Weasley nodded softly, tilting his head in begrudging acceptance, before leaving with his sons.

Harry wanted to wince. Mr. Weasley had trusted him with a horcrux and openly stood up for him against Lupin's disappointment. Harry'd broken that trust so damn quickly.

It was necessary, Harry knew, but it still made him want to curl up in a ball and apologize a million times.

Instead, Harry turned back to Dumbledore and crossed his arms over his chest, refusing to feel sorry for what he'd had to do.

Harry had to force his face to remain expressionless at the sudden strong, hard, silencing wards that solidified around them unexpectedly.

"I should have been invited to this, Headmaster, unless you expect me to win a war without ever being part of it. Don't try to chastise me for coming." Harry said immediately once the wards were fully erected.

"I'm going to need to see the dark magic you contained yesterday." Dumbledore replied calmly.

Harry felt himself blink in surprise, before he fully processed the question and let himself sigh quietly, wondering who'd gotten to Dumbledore first, Mr. Weasley or Lupin.

Harry reached his hand into his pocket and pulled the horcrux out of the wards that kept it stuck to his clothing. Dumbledore's eyes widened and the whole man tipped forward to get a better look at the jewelry case.

"Oh, you do not know how much trouble you have saved us here, my boy." Dumbledore said, reaching forward. Harry closed his fingers over the top of the small box, subtly refusing to relinquish it.

"Why do you trust Professor Snape, Headmaster?" Harry asked quietly, staring at the small jewelry box in his hand. He watched through his eyelashes as the Headmaster drew himself upright again, and gazed at him, though he couldn't make out the old man's expression. Harry wasn't sure he wanted to.

"I've refused that question before, my boy, and for good reasons." Dumbledore said, his voice hard. Harry looked up to see Dumbledore pushing his spectacles back up his nose.

"I didn't need to know it before." Harry replied, shaking his head.

"As you do not need to know now. Such knowledge is rarely as necessary or pleasant as one thinks when not in possession of it, and as a man wiser than me once said, 'In war, truth is the first casualty.'"1 Dumbledore replied.

"Just give me one respectful answer, Professor." Harry said, resisting the urge to push his fingers up into his hair in his frustration.

"Alas, you have continued in your habit of asking the very questions I can not answer. You must respect my response to your question, and stop asking it." Dumbledore replied.

Harry looked down at the ground, feeling almost shameful before he pulled his eyes back to face Dumbledore as he gathered his words and his reasons.

"I can't hand you an active horcrux unless I know I can trust you to keep it away from spies, Headmaster." Harry declared. Really he'd just wanted a single question answered by the man but now he was thinking more, he was right, he needed to know if Snape was trustworthy, if Dumbledore even considered the loyalty of his perfect 'Order of the Phoenix'. No one could trust Dumbledore's confidence without implicitly trusting Snape's, Snape was too privy to what Dumbledore knew.

"I'd trust Professor Snape with my life, and I have done so, my boy," Dumbledore said, holding up his shriveled hand, "but even so I have not told him of this matter nor am I planning to." Dumbledore said.

"What information have you trusted him with?" Harry pressed. "Has any of it gotten out?"

"Truth is the first casualty my boy, the Order and the Death Eaters have been swapping lies for years and I'm afraid that will not change."

"That's not an answer." Harry said, even as he doubted that Dumbledore would ever give him one.

"I have been tolerant enough with this question already," Dumbledore said harshly, "my reply has not changed."

"I need to know, Dumbledore." Harry argued.

"And I would ask for you to trust me, my boy." Dumbledore replied immediately.

"Ah, Harry, how often this happens, even between the best of friends! Each of us wants something from the other that he simply cannot give." Dumbledore said suddenly, almost cheerfully. Harry felt his frustration deepen at the tone.

"Do you respect me at all?" Harry asked suddenly, shaking his head.

Dumbledore sighed, gazing at Harry seriously before shuffling up a few steps and sitting down on the armchair behind him.

"Sit down my boy, you seem to be very lost." Dumbledore said.

"I'm trying to do what's right." Harry defended.

"And alas, we get to the great problem of defense." Dumbledore said sagely, nodding.

"Which is?" Harry pressed, trying to keep the anger from his voice even as he wanted to shake the headmaster out of his dramatic speeches.

"It is the struggle of how far you can go without destroying from within what you are trying to defend from without.<sup>2</sup>" Dumbledore said. "It is originally a muggle quote, but I fear it remains very apt in our world." He said sagely, staring at the wall behind Harry's shoulder before suddenly clicking his eyes back to Harry's gaze.

"War can do terrible things to a man, my boy. Love is your greatest and most fragile weapon. You care about people, Harry, and after all you've been through that fact is more than commendable. Do not let me give you any task that threatens your ability to really care about people as you do."

"I care about people, which is why I'll take any task there is." Harry said, putting the horcrux deep into his pocket. "I care about people more than I care about myself. Is that true for you again? Do you care about people more than you care about me?" Harry asked, remembering Dumbledore's confession after Sirius's death.

Dumbledore sighed and seemed to sink into his chair as he ran a wrinkled hand over his face.

"You appeal to the errors of an old man." He said.

"Start gathering forces, start really fighting back. Forget me as your hero and do something, or give me the tasks and the information I need to win this. If you care about me, tell me why I should trust Snape, so I may fight with that trust in you both. If you care about the war, tell me what I need to know about Snape so I can better fight in the war." Harry asserted, feeling foolishly like he was giving a badly worded speech. He couldn't remember why he'd thought of himself as Dumbledore's man when the Headmaster had only ever fooled and ignored him. Harry almost felt like praying that the old man would just answer his questions and let things go back to the way they were before, when he had a mentor and could believe that the Headmaster of his school was going to win the whole war single-handedly and everything would be okay.

"Your feelings are understandable my boy, reasonable, even." Dumbledore said, sounding almost mournful. "It is indeed a rare man who will fight for a leader for no reason but for trust in him." The headmaster continued softly.

Harry felt his stomach drop and forced his expression clear, even as he wanted to scream or cry.

Neville was a better man than he, a better soldier. Harry no longer had any doubt of it. He'd betrayed something accidentally, and he wasn't entirely sure where he'd gone wrong, but he knew he couldn't



go back. He needed to know why he should trust Dumbledore, because if he wrongfully entrusted a piece of Voldemort's soul to the old man, the war would be over before it had barely begun.

"Excuse me, professor." Harry said, forcing himself to stop staring shamefully at the carpet and pulling his face up to meet the Headmaster's gaze with dignity before he turned toward the kitchen door.

"What are you planning to do, my boy?" Dumbledore asked from behind him. Harry turned back, forcing his eyes to stay on the older man's face.

"First I'm going to spend my study session writing a speech to make the Order's mission public. Then I'm going to do my daily exercise and spend the rest of my day magiclessly helping Mrs. Weasley make dinner while discussing warding theory with Bill. Good evening, professor." Harry said carefully, before walking out of the room. He wanted to sprint out of the kitchen side door and slam himself into his exercise routine but he kept his feet pointed toward the stairs up to his room where his work was inevitably waiting for him.

~~HP~~

Dear Minister Scrimgeour,

I will be pleased to meet with you for tea that evening.

Have an excellent weekend,

Sincerely,

Harry Potter

It seemed ridiculous that such a letter took him five drafts to write.

~~HP~

Harry was ordering his second butterbeer by the time Scrimgeour finally entered the Still-Glowing Wand Beverage House, a quiet and reserved little establishment off of Diagon Alley that famously offered a hundred different types of tea and three different flavorings of butterbeer.

Was making me wait a power-play or an easy mistake? Harry wondered, feeling miles out of his league.

"Harry, you'll forgive my tardiness. I've been busy enough for four men this week." Scrimgeour said seriously as he approached the table, hand outstretched.

A power-play, Harry guessed at hearing the order.

"Mr. Potter, and of course." Harry replied lightly, standing up to shake Scrimgeour's hand before he settling back into his chair.

"Excellent." Scrimgeour said neutrally before turning to the waitress who'd come with Harry's butterbeer and politely ordering a mug of tea.

"Why did you ask me here, Minister" Harry asked bluntly, thinking of the day's studying he had yet to do. He almost thought he had an understanding of what magical signatures were, and he had three ore books arriving that day.

"Blunt, Mr. Potter, that's best of course. I've been busy as a house-elf in a Christmas party." Scrimgeour said, nodding easily and taking a quick swallow of his tea and starting.

"I underestimated you, Mr. Potter. You're going to be a real force in this war, won't you?" Scrimgeour said with a smile.

Condescending, Harry thought, wanting to scream or simply smack the man.

"You used to be a class 5 auror and head of the department, Minister. You should be far more of a force in this than I." Harry replied, hoping to remind the condescending man that he was once respectable.

For a moment Harry thought he saw Scrimgeour's cheerfulness drop and reveal the very aware gaze of an auror in the Minister's face. In less than a second though the irritating cheerfulness had returned in force.

"And just think of us together, Harry- pardon- Mr. Potter, together we may be able to give true hope to the wizarding world!" Scrimgeour said.

He has no respect for me and he wants me to be the Ministry's poster boy, Harry thought immediately, feeling anger rise in him yet again that day.

"Consider it, Mr. Potter. Whether or not you are the Chosen One does not really matter, it's all about perception, isn't it? People believe you are the Chosen One, you see, they think you quite the hero – and the idea that there is somebody out there who might be able, who might even be destined to destroy He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named- well, naturally, it gives people hope. You are a symbol of hope for many, and the Wizarding World needs a sign that we are doing something, that we are effectively protecting them from the Death Eaters. "

"Perhaps actually doing something to effectively protect them from the Death Eaters would be an appropriate sign." Harry replied before taking a gulp of his butterbeer.

"And we are doing so!, two arrests just this week," Scrimgeour said before shaking his head and taking a small sip of his tea. "No, see,

people are afraid, they know the Death Eaters could come from them and that there are simply not enough Ministry Officials to save them all. People die in war, and they are afraid it will be them or their families." Scrimgeour said, finally beginning to sound respectable. Harry nodded his understanding and took a sip from his butterbeer without taking his eyes from the Minister, silently promising his attention.

"This is not a time for the British wizardry to lose faith and panic or protest. We must be united, and you and I, we have a duty to protect that unity as we can. It could be said that it is both of our duty to stand alongside the Ministry, Mr. Potter. It could even save lives." Scrimgeour said.

I'm getting sick of that 'saving lives' line, Harry thought, almost wincing as he heard it yet again and wondered if everyone who said it was trying to manipulate his 'saving people thing' against him.

"It is your duty, Minister, certainly, but not mine." Harry replied seriously before sucking the last of his butterbeer down his throat, glad to be done with it. He was expected to continue speaking with the man at least through one drink.

"It would be nothing too onerous, I assure you," said Scrimgeour quickly, apparently realizing he was running out of time. "If you were to be seen popping in and out of the Ministry from time to time, for instance, that would give the right impression, and of course right now I have a press conference set up for us both to greet the coming year. It's about moral in a warzone, and it is the duty of every man capable to stay here and work to improve our dire situation. It's all about giving people hope, Mr. Potter, which may be a far more powerful force than you realize. "

That could be true, Harry thought, thinking of all the families fleeing the country. The Ministry needed them to stand and fight and he'd just spent five hours writing a speech about that.

The speech, Harry remembered.

"Will there be press there?" Harry asked.

"Of course." Scrimgeour grinned broadly, looking like the infamous Cheshire cat with his cat-like man and overly-wide smile.

"I would like to speak then, please," Harry said, trying to look meek. "for unity of course." He scrambled to add.

"Of course." Scrimgeour smiled.

"Then, yes." Harry agreed.

"Excellent then!" Scrimgeour said, seeming to deflate into his chair with his satisfaction. "And of course, while you were there, you would have ample opportunity to speak to Gawain Roards, my successor as Head of the Auror office. Dolores Umbridge has told me that you cherish an ambition to become an Auror. Well, that could be arranged very easily..."

Scrimgeour trailed off as Harry allowed his expression to clearly reveal his anger at the implication.

"Of course you're right, no time to waste, my boy, no time to waste." Scrimgeour said, grabbing onto Harry's arm. Harry felt Scrimgeour preparing to apparate and resisted ripping his arm away at the Minister's presumption.

~~HP~~

It was too quiet, Harry thought when he landed outside the Ministry building expecting to hear another screaming crowd and instead finding barely ten camaramen waiting for them.

A camera flashed in his face immediately and Harry felt Scrimgeour's arm wrap around him. Harry stepped forward slightly, letting the arm fall away from him.

"Welcome to the New Year!" Scrimgeour shouted, smiling and waving behind the photographers. Harry found himself stretching out his magic, searching for the magic of a crowd wrapped in invisibility wards before he realized what Scrimgeour was doing. The Ministry newspapers were doubtlessly going to post everything he said word-for-word along with his photo, to give the impression of some monumental speech that somehow everyone missed.

This way he can redo it if he wants, Harry realized, wanting to snort as he watched a few pedestrians walking in front of the Ministry building smirking at the man.

"I stand before you all, joined here with Harry Potter, to collectively reassure the Wizarding World that the Ministry will make this coming year a safe, bountiful one. The Ministry of Magic will fight for you, will stand strong as your protection against the forces of any Dark Wizard, and self-proclaimed Dark Lord that threatens your freedom. Thank you, wizards and witches of wizarding Britain, for your support and loyalty in these trying times. It is of course Unity that unites us all, that brings us together and keeps us strong against the forces of separation." Scrimgeour announced, before nodding gruffly to the press who immediately started to pack up.

Unity that unites us against separation, seriously?

Harry forced down a laugh and stepped forward, trying to ignore the way his knees immediately wanted to give out.

"Wait," Harry said to the photographers, holding up a hand seriously.

Ow, Harry thought, having bitten his tongue on the one word. I am so far from being a 'symbol of hope'. Either way, the photographers set

themselves up again for his turn at making a speech.

"He can not keep you safe." Harry announced, gesturing roughly to the Minister behind him. He saw the press officials grin at his words and immediately pay more attention to him.

"Er—Harry—" Scrimgeour started from behind him.

"Not on his own." Harry added loudly, using his wand to summon one of the 'Ministry Safety Pamphlets' off of the wall behind them. It flew into his hand and he displayed it in front of him. "This will not keep you safe on its own. You can not lock your door and hide away, you cannot simply—" Harry scanned the notice with his eyes and picked one of its edicts "'Agree on security questions with close friends and family so as to detect Death Eaters masquerading as others by use of the Polyjuice Potion'". That will help, but that Will. Not. Stop them," Harry declared "The Death Eaters prove that to us every day. The man who calls himself the Dark Lord will not stop or go away, despite our many prayers that that could be so. This war is not going to end in surrender or negotiation! The Death Eaters are not going to stop! That means that we have one option, we must stop them! We must fight! Fight to survive, fight for your homes and your safety and your families, fight! Fight for your lives and your friend's lives and your children's lives, fight so that one day your children and your children's children may walk down the street in safety, pureblood and muggleborn.

"We live in a beautiful country, a country rich in soil, life, and culture, and we are now called to defend it. We live in this land as one wizardry, we share our buildings and our streets and our schools, no we must fight as one to defend everything we have been blessed with, to defend our homes and our neighborhoods and our children.

"We can not rely on our Ministry to fight it alone. This Minister beside me can not win this fight on his own. I can not win this fight on my own. We must come together, as Scrimgeour and I have come

together, to do our part, no matter how onerous, no matter how rough, and no matter how costly, because the cost of not fighting, of remaining separate and allowing the Death Eaters to consume our country from the inside, will be twice as onerous, twice as costly.

"Wandmakers, donate your weapons. Potionmakers, brew healing potions and bruise balms, anything you can think of that can help. Clothmakers, spell bandages with everything you have. No matter who you are, there is a way you can help, every wand, potion, bandage, galleon and fighter helps. Spread the word, find a way you can fight and join those who are already fighting. The eyes of the country are upon you. The safety of your homes and the lives of all you hold dear, depend upon your courage and exertions. Let each man resolve to be victorious, and that the right of self-government, liberty, and peace shall in him find a defender. The progress of this army must be forward. We will win this war, we have no other choice." Harry finished, resisting the urge to run a hand over his forehead in his relief that he was finished speaking.

A small semicircle of people had gathered behind the press officials, Harry noticed after a moment as he looked around. All of the wizards were staring at him silently as if waiting for an invitation to respond. It was awkward to give random speeches, Harry decided.

"If we are to fight who is to lead us?" A darkly robed man called out from the handful of wizards collected from the street.

"Didn't you elect me to do just that?" Scrimgeour said, stepping forward to stand beside Harry again.

"Personally I elected that man to lead the aurors and wizarding police against He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named, and now you're telling me I have to fight? That the war is too big for him?" The man snorted.

"Have you never read a book, dumbass? Usually the man who makes the speech makes the decisions." A gray-haired witch



sneered out, facing straight at Harry. Harry could feel the crowd's attention return to him.

"What, I'm supposed to go from trusting fucking Cornelius Fudge, to Rufus, to Harry Potter with this damn war?" The darkly-robed wizard returned.

"Have respect for the Boy-Who-Lived!" An old wizard called out, gesturing toward him.

"He's a teenager telling us to fight." The gray-haired witch laughed out. "Tell me, Mr. Potter, what do you know about fighting the Dark Lord?, about how onerous facing him can be."

"I know I've lost a good friend, two parents, a godfather and a good bit of my childhood to him." Harry stated, staring straight back at her.

"I'm sorry for your loss." The woman said, flushing. "I lost my son and godson, I simply --" The woman sighed, and lifted her head to glare above his shoulder as she spoke, "I thought Scrimgeour would take his aurors and strike against the Death Eaters so I could go home to my family where I belong. Either way, I am no fighting witch, I am no auror, so Scrimgeour isn't my commanding general." She said.

"Where are we supposed to send all these wands and galleons?" A young-looking wizard called out, causing an affirmative stir in the crowd.

Harry sighed, and made a quick decision, hoping he wasn't making some massive mistake that would lead him to Azkaban for extortion or some such.

"My vault number is 687, send your supplies there, and I will make sure they get to the right place." Harry promised.

"And if we want to fight?" The young-looking wizard shouted back.

"Err--" Harry stuttered before forcefully stopping himself and making another decision. "Send your names and I'll find a battle for you." Harry swore, hoping the Order would take them.

"How will your owl get through our wards?"

"That sounds dangerous!"

"The Dark Lord would kill anyone who tried!"

Harry held up his hand as the small crowd started shouting out.

"Trust the Goblins and trust me to keep your name a secret. No one else will know it except the commander who you are sent to work with." Harry called out. "The progress of this war will be forward!" He shouted again, holding out his fist and this time hearing cheers and applause start out with it. The tiny crowd was loud, he thought.

"Am I supposed to ignore you calling civilian wizards to arm themselves as vigilantes right in front of me?" Scrimgeour asked quietly.

"I thought you wanted a sign that we were working together, Scrimgeour. Surely you've heard the phrase 'the enemy of my enemy'? Harry replied, doing his best to keep his voice low and hoping the Minister could still hear him. He'd feel foolish repeating himself.

"The enemy of my enemy is my enemy's enemy, Mr. Potter. I can make of him what I chose." Scrimgeour muttered back, his voice deeper and more dangerous than Harry had ever expected from what he'd seen of the irritatingly upbeat man.

"The whole wizarding world will soon know that we are working together," Harry whispered. "unless of course, you stop this right

here."

He could simply not publish this, Harry thought, wondering how he would handle that.

Scrimgeour was staring at him, Harry noticed out of the side of his eye as the Minister turned his entire head to face him fully. Scrimgeour chuckled quietly to himself, a deep, serious sound with nothing in common at all with the cheerful laughing he'd insisted on before.

"I definitely underestimated you, Mr. Potter. I suspect I'll be regretting that." The Minister said finally, glancing over the small crowd as the press busied themselves taking pictures of the two figures standing together.

"Perhaps not." Harry replied aloud, remembering what he'd decided to say, "after all, a non-government affiliated militia can come in handy from time to time."

"They are mostly just illegal, Mr. Potter." Scrimgeour replied.

"They're good in the gray times of war when the laws are too black and white and auror regulations are-" Harry pretended to struggle to find a soft enough word, "well, frankly impractical." He finished, feeling foolishly like an actor who'd never learned his proper lines and was faking it far over-dramatically.

"You're a more complicated man than I expected Mr. Potter." Scrimgeour said, and the respect in the title 'Mr. Potter' seemed less arbitrary somehow in his tone. "I expect being underestimated is one of your greatest strengths." The Minister added.

"I'd be dead multiple times over if it weren't." Harry commented as he watched the crowd shuffling off awkwardly.

"And me as well." Scrimgeour replied.

"I suspect that's true." Harry said quietly, thinking of the bubbly, idiotic man he'd taken the Minister to be only minutes before.

"I'm afraid I should go. I know you're as busy as a house-elf in Christmas." Harry said, trying to keep the ridicule out of his voice even as he subtly asked why the man had acted so ridiculously.

"Indeed I am. Good day, Mr. Potter." Scrimgeour said.

Still a powerplay, Harry thought, wanting to shake his head.

"Good day, Minister." Harry replied, before apparating away.

He landed with a crack in the Weasley orchard, grinning at the underage magic law he'd just openly broken in front of the current Minister of Magic.

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1Aeschylus

2Dwight Eisenhower

Hello all, I apologize for this update being so late (again), I had a midterm crawl out of the woodwork followed shortly by an essay on Roman law and this chapter took a Lot of work. Researched terrorist guerilla warfare tactics and counter-insurgency measures from Afganistan, Iraq, Asia, Colonial America, and French Algeria to try and decide how I wanted wizarding warfare to look, and it took a bit of time, aka the good part of this month. In any case, I'll tell you what my grades were with my next update, and this is indeed done:

~~HP~~

"I figured it out." Harry gasped, looking up from where'd he'd been staring at the wall over Ron's cot, feeling the 'core' of his magic shift under his concentration. It felt like all of the magic in his body was changing colors within him. Harry cast a protection spell over the quill's on Ron's bedside table, concentrating on changing his magical signature.

"That's just weird." Harry whispered to himself, swinging his legs over the side of his cot so he could stare straight at where the wards were held. The spell he'd cast didn't feel like his, it felt like a stranger had walked in and cast the wards for him.

Harry closed his eyes, focusing on the foreign ward's keyhole, feeling for the magic that denoted who was allowed through the ward. From there all he had to do was shift his internal magic to feel like what the ward was looking for and pick up the quill.

"I figured it out." Harry repeated to himself, staring at the quill in his hand. He put his hand back to replace it and felt the hard wall of the ward push against his fingers.

"Wow." Harry whispered, gently placing Ron's quill beside the ward wall.

I need to study everything I can about keyholes, Harry decided

immediately, knowing he'd have to learn how to identify them out of every different kind of ward magic he came across. It was going to take a lot of practice, but he could learn anything with enough time and the important part of this was that it worked.

Harry padded out of Ron's room quietly and closed the door before he bounded up the steps toward Bill's room, knowing the older Weasley was always awake and dressed by nine o'clock. Indeed Bill's door was even hanging open, revealing Bill and Fleur sitting at his desk. Harry knocked on the door-frame quietly until Bill looked up and gestured him in.

"Hey Harry, what's up?" Bill asked, leaning back in his chair to speak around Fleur's shoulder.

"I was wondering if you could suggest some good titles on keyhole magic in wards for me." Harry answered, walking forward to lean comfortably against the door-frame.

"I can probably do better than that. Offensive or defensive wards?" Bill asked as he pushed himself out of his chair and started toward his trunk.

"Both, preferably, and I'd like to study Aggressive and Non-Aggressive wards too but no rush, I've only got two more hours of studying I can do today anyway and I still have one more book to finish." Harry said, shrugging.

"No worries, Fleur and I are just working on wedding arrangements that I have no useful opinion on." Bill said, digging a ring of keys from his pocket and beginning on the four locks covering his trunk.

"You forget, you care 'ntirely." Fleur said without looking up from her work at the desk.

"Ah yes, I did say that, didn't I?" Bill said with his head buried in his

open trunk.

"In zat about tone, yes." Fleur replied, turning around and mock glaring.

"So really dear, I hate the choice of red and yellow trim around the table cloths. Obviously they should be blue. It's only tasteful with blue." Bill said, walking back with an armful of books.

"Red and white, I vill assume you mean." Fleur said loftily.

"Precisely." Bill grinned as he handed the books to Harry.

"You simply have to add a daisy design around them too. To brighten up their er..." Harry searched for a word.

"Their aesthetic suggestion of bliss." Bill put in, nodding assuredly.

"Precisely." Harry agreed.

"See, dear, I care." Bill said with a loving expression on his face.

"Lying bastard." Fleur grumbled in her beautiful voice, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Damn straight." Bill said, kissing her lightly before turning back to Harry.

"Okay, so those are the best books in the world for you. Well written, clear, and best of all, actually accurate. I'm guessing you've taught yourself everything you'll need to know about wards to understand 'um, but if not, please come ask me anytime."

"Right, thanks much." Harry said, flipping one of the four books over to see a picture of the author stop writing and wave at him awkwardly.

"Please, please come ask." Bill pleaded.

Harry looked up to see Fleur dragging Bill back down to the desk and laughed, nodding at him.

Harry left, still laughing, and wished that he could put extra hours in the day so he could fight the war and still spend time with the people he was fighting for. He was starting to really enjoy the time he spent at the Weasleys without a book or body in front of him, but it was all burrowed time from the war effort, and no one could afford that.

Ron woke beside him about an hour later, looking up from his bed and scoffing out a quick 'don't you do anything but study?' before he rolled out of bed and headed out toward the shower. Harry left his answer as quick 'not much' and continued taking notes on what he most needed to remember as he read. He'd remember it all anyway, but it helped him sort out his thoughts when he started feeling like he knew too much to ever really apply any of it without spinning his head in circles.

Still, during one of his next breaks, Harry hoped he'd find a way to reconcile things with Ron. He wasn't sure what that was going to be though, since there was nothing he could change. He simply didn't do much but study, and he certainly wasn't going to tell Ron what he was doing while away from his books.

The problem, Harry figured as he stared at his notes near the end of his day's five hours, was that all of the knowledge about keyholes came from wizards attempting to break or unravel set wards and their studies almost universally ignored the magical signature of the castor. Harry needed to know how to search within a spell's magic to find out who it was allowing through, and there wasn't any research done for that. Mostly, Harry guessed, he just needed to practice and learn how to apply the knowledge he was gathering about the keyholes themselves.



"Damn." Harry said aloud, closing the book with a heavy thump and almost tossing it into his growing collection of finished reference books before he remembered Bill and put it aside to return it when he finished with the others.

"Breakfast!" Harry heard called cheerfully from downstairs and nodded at his timing, getting up with a stretch and shaking out his aching hands as he left Ron's room for the kitchen.

Ron was already there, set facing the stairs as always, well prepared to glare at Harry as he came down. This time at least Hermione was there too, already seemingly trying to distract him with a lecture on simple form-complete organic transfiguration.

"Hey Hermione, when'd you arrive?" Harry interrupted purposefully, ignoring Ron 's glare as he sat with the rest of the chattering Weasleys.

"Uh..yesterday morning, Harry." Hermione said, glancing sideways at Ron who was now staring mouth agape at him, looking apt to explode.

"Oh," Harry winced.

"I'm sorry," Harry forced himself to say politely, rather than stuttering and turning red as his body wanted to.

"Arsehole." Ron muttered, shaking his head.

"Ron, it's okay." Hermione said, shrugging slightly.

"No it's really not. It's bloody fucked-up is what it is." Ron said, staring straight at Harry then. Harry blinked, before looking down at the table. He had nothing to defend himself with.

"RON!" Mrs. Weasley shouted.

"HE SHOULD HEAR!" Ron shouted back before turning back to sneer at Harry. "He didn't even notice she was here for a whole fucking day? For Merlin's sake Mum, he does that shite and you don't believe me that he doesn't care for us any more than a garden gnome gives for the shite on its feet."

"I care." Harry said quietly. The whole table was silent.

"Yeah, Hippogriff's shit."

"RONALD WEASLEY!" Mrs. Weasley shouted again, banging on the table with her fingers.

"Let them be, dear." Mr. Weasley said quietly. To Harry's surprise, Mrs. Weasley silenced at that and began dishing out food to all.

"Ron, please, Harry is just busy." Hermione defended, putting a hand on Ron's shoulder.

"No one should be too busy for his friends." Ron said.

"True, but Harry's doing something important." Hermione said.

They sound so young in this, Harry thought, though he was unable to dispute either of their points.

"Apparently we're not important to him." Ron scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest.

"That's not true!" Hermione shrieked.

"Guys, seriously, not here." Ginny said, glaring at them both. Harry shot a grateful look at her, though he wasn't sure she caught it.

The entire table was staring at Ron in annoyance.

Ron was starting to make a fool of himself, Harry thought, wanting to blush over all the times he'd publicly exploded in his anger, when he wasn't even sure what or who he was angry at.

"So how are the wedding arrangements coming, Fleur?" Charlie asked out of the silence.

"Oh, 'ey are coming along beautifully. I 'ave only 'ot two or t'ree more t'ings to arrange and it will be wonderful. Bill has been such a 'elp, you know." Fleur took over, kissing Bill on the cheek before turning toward the table again. "We have the best idea for the table cloths, t'ey will be brilliant-

"In fact, I have an announcement to make." Mrs. Weasley interrupted loudly. Harry wanted to complain but watched as Fleur took it gracefully and leaned back into her chair.

"There will be an emergency Order meeting here in two hours, a small one and without Dumbledore, so as you know, no one in the living room and don't let me catch you trying to eavesdrop." Mrs. Weasley ordered, glaring the entire time at Fred and George.

Harry glanced at Mr. Weasley to find him watching him carefully.

"No, Mrs. Weasley, I'm joining." Harry announced.

"Harry, as I just said-" Mrs. Weasley started, sounding annoyed.

"And I respect that, but I'm refusing your order. I'm joining." Harry declared.

"Then I am too!" Ron said loudly, jumping up from the table and letting his chair clatter to the ground behind him.

"No you are not, Ronald Bilius Weasley, now sit down and stop the

dramatics." Mrs. Weasley ordered. Ron obeyed, obviously settling on glaring at Harry instead.

"Harry, you are not an Order member." Mrs. Weasley said calmly.

"I know, but I should be." Harry said, "By the time I'm assumed to be some trump card weapon in this, I at very least should be recognized as part of the war effort and treated as such."

"Oh Harry, Dumbledore has his reasons." Mrs. Weasley professed, shaking his head.

"Yes and they are bad ones." Harry replied shortly.

"Are they Harry? You don't even know what all of them are." Mr. Weasley argued.

"I know most of them are about my safety and age which is idiotic after I'm tasked with defeating the Dark Lord in this war and no one is going to ask me to wait until I'm seventeen and of age to die violently." Harry replied.

"Protecting you is not foolish!" Mrs. Weasley insisted.

"I'm not saying it is. I'm saying that sheltering me is." Harry said.

The table was silent again.

They can't think of a reply? Harry wondered hopefully.

"I'll be in the meeting." Harry repeated.

"That's none of our decision." Mr. Weasley said softly.

"What, you're caving to him?" Ron scoffed. "We've been arguing for years and you just agree with him? What does he get everything he

wants?"

"How about we have a silent meal for once?" Mrs. Weasley said determinedly.

"Yes, lets." Mr. Weasley agreed, quickly concentrating on his food.

Harry nodded slowly, dipping his head back down to watch his plate as he ate. He needed to find a way with Ron.

"Bill, I want to show you something, see what you think." Harry said quietly as Mrs. Weasley cast a quick spell to clean the plates off the table and return them to the cabinets. Ron and Hermione had already made their way off to the living room together, Hermione already back into her transfiguration lecture.

Bill nodded and followed him out, walking in silence beside Harry until they'd made it back to their spot at the end of the orchard. Harry cast the silencing wards that time and sat down on his tree stump.

"What's new, Harry?" Bill asked, sitting as well.

"Cast a physical shielding ward over that rock." Harry said, pointing to a small pebble on the ground.

Bill obeyed wordlessly, before leaning forward to watch Harry, obviously waiting for an explanation. Harry closed his eyes, concentrating on the simple ward Bill had created and finding its keyhole. Harry nodded as he found it and leaned forward, snatching the rock off from within the ward.

"You learned to unravel wards that quickly?" Bill asked, raising his eyebrows.

Harry shook his head. Unravelling wards was a technique of lowering defensive or offensive words without setting off any of their traps or

alarms, a skill that reportedly took years to master.

"There wasn't any destruction image." Bill said.

"That's because I didn't destroy the ward." Harry explained, giving up his concentration on his magical signature and trying again to touch where the rock was. The ward stopped his fingers and he cupped his hand over where he could feel the invisible wall of magic blocking him.

"Is this what you were talking about researching before?" Bill asked, staring at where Harry's hand cupped the ground and pulling out his wand. Harry felt Bill's detection spell and watched his eyes go wide.

"Yes. I'm learning how to go through wards, rather than breaking or unraveling them." Harry said.

"Harry, what does this mean?" Bill asked without moving his eyes from the small ward.

"I don't know what I can do with this yet, I need to study further." Harry admitted.

"But you can get into any easily warded home, get in and out without alerting anyone." Bill said, shaking his head and staring out toward the Weasley home before turning his head to stare back at Harry. "Harry you can go anywhere, undetected, as if you'd never entered the ward at all." He said.

"Yes." Harry replied, knowing that was the obvious conclusion.

"Holy hell." Bill breathed out, returning to gazing out toward his home.

Harry didn't reply, letting Bill keep his silence.

"This may change how the war is fought." Bill said after a while.

"I suspect so." Harry replied, nodding and standing up from the tree stump.

"I'm assuming that would take you years to teach me?" Bill asked as he pulled himself standing. Harry thought it over. Bill couldn't even feel his internal magic.

"Most likely." Harry replied.

"Well, that's one reason to get both of us through this war. That's something I've got to learn. One good thieving and I'd be set for life" Bill grinned, shaking his head as he started toward the house.

"After the war." Harry agreed, grinning. "we shall become house thieves."

"No no, you underestimate our future power." Bill said, shaking his head. "We, shall become the first to steal from Gringotts!"

"And we shall steal the lot!" Harry agreed, chuckling.

"Set ourselves up in Fiji, with hot witches and cold butterbeer." Bill expanded, arcing his hand through the air as he described it.

"Until the Ministry comes and jails our asses." Harry replied.

"Well, yes, but we'll walk right out. Confuse the crap out of them." Bill laughed.

"Good point." Harry agreed. "And go back to Fiji."

"Hot witches and cold butterbeer, I'm telling you."

"Let's get this war bitch over with." Harry growled, before laughing and shaking his head.

"Speaking of which, I'm not going to be at the Order meeting today, I'm meeting with Dumbledore about who knows what. You're gunna have to hide behind the others this time." Bill said.

"Alright." Harry chuckled, shrugging. He didn't think it was going to be too difficult to eavesdrop whether or not he had Weasleys to hide behind.

"Hey, I'm sorry about Ron." Bill said when they reached the door to enter the Weasley's home.

"It's not your fault." Harry replied, sighing.

"Yeah, but I'm not thinking it's yours either." Bill replied.

"It is partly." Harry answered as he opened the door and walked inside the loud home.

~~HP~~

Harry watched the Order members apparate into the Weasley's orchard from where he sat beneath his invisibility cloak in the garden. Order member after order member rushed past him without glancing in his direction. Most of them Harry already recognized, if not knew personally. Harry sighed, watching the cloud of his breath seemingly appear out of nowhere as soon as it left his invisibility cloak as he waited for McGonagall. McGonagall was always the last to arrive.

Finally she cracked into the yard, looking harried and worried as she rushed toward the house. Harry got up silently, holding his breath to hide the obvious cloud until she'd passed him, sneaking through the doorway into the warm kitchen as the door closed behind her.



"Hello Minerva, the living room as always." Mrs. Weasley said as they entered, taking her apron off and handing it to a sullen-looking Ron peeling potatoes at the sink.

"Of course. Let's hope we can make this productive." McGonagall replied, walking behind Mrs. Weasley through the wards into the living room.

Test number two, Harry thought, feeling for the warding magic closed over the living room and concentrating on the feel of it and the magical signatures it was permitting.

Excellent, Harry thought as he put a hand forward and let his invisible hand pass through the ward.

He moved slowly, knowing the seemingly empty room was in fact full of people he could run into. He pushed his head through first, blinking as suddenly his eyes were surrounded by people being loud.

"-Eater attack is running down Apic Alley at 12:00 hoping to hit Watcher's Wands." Moody was preaching.

Too many people were piled by the door, Harry thought, shifting forward carefully to lay a foot within the room and turn to the side so as not to bump a dark-haired Order member he was pretty sure was named Michael. Harry slid along the back wall, sucking in his breath as he listened to Moody barking out orders as always. Just the sound of the man's voice made him want to jump forward and obey as damn quickly and efficiently as possible, to be the best, to be better, to be better now.

"We leave now. We set up the normal protections and traps and we get the hell out of there. Group A, take the left side of the street and block any alleys there. Group B, the right side. Let's move out." Moody demanded.

"Hold on a good moment, Alastor." Mrs. Weasley protested calmly.

"Yeah, seriously, woah." Tonks agreed, shaking her head.

Harry shifted a bit further from the door so he could watch Moody as he spoke, barely breathing as he heard his back scratch loudly against the wall.

"Where did this information come from, Moody?" A light haired wizard Harry didn't recognize called out.

"That's monkey shit in a bucket." Moody growled.

The hell does that mean?

"It matters, Alastor." A witch spoke up from her place near the door.  
"We were wrong about the last two raids."

"I can't be leaving the house every time a Death Eater sneezes, Alastor. I have kids to raise." The dark-haired wizard by the door complained.

"Then leave the Order." Moody ordered.

"Half the Order members are parents, Moody, and we need them. We need you Michael." Lupin spoke up from his chair near the side door.

"We need to win this war don't we?" Moody growled at him.

"That's my point, yes." Lupin replied.

"Then we have to respond to raids, real or fake, every time." Moody replied before spitting on the carpet. "How the fuck else you think we're gunna catch the scurrying rats?"

"Please don't spit on my floor, Alastor." Mr. Weasley said patiently, sounding tired.

"That's like what, the fifth time you've had to say that?" Tonks laughed.

"Something like." Mrs. Weasley growled.

"We're wasting time no one has, let's go." Moody demanded.

"Agreed." Mr. Weasley said, standing up from his chair.

"Let's move out!" Moody barked.

"Merlin, pushy pushy pushy." Tonks joked, shaking her head as she put on her coat.

"One militaristic-ass man, I'm with you there." The young light-haired wizard replied, grinning fully at Tonks.

"Excuse me, Tucker, would you mind handing me that coat?" Lupin said, pointing behind the young man but staring the entire time at the man's face.

Harry watched as 'Tucker' flushed and nodded, turning quickly and handing the coat over submissively. Tonks was grinning, he noticed.

That was weird, Harry thought, glancing between the two as he let the room shuffle out around him.

Moody was last to leave, as always, staying and glaring at everyone's backs as they made their way through the thin doorway.

"Idiots." Moody growled as he folded himself into his coat.

Harry grinned and lowered his invisibility cloak's hood, knowing it

was useless near Moody's eye.

"Is being militaristic so bad?" Harry asked curiously before Moody turned to leave.

In a wink Harry found himself dodging as Moody rushed toward him, letting himself leap and roll under the man's wand to jump up with his own wand pointed at Moody's.

"Huh, can't see through my invisibility cloak, can you?" Harry said, grinning. "Lying bastard."

"Well, it's you." Moody grumbled, lowering his wand.

"And the cloak?" Harry asked, slipping his own wand back into its arm holster.

"Magical eye can't see through that cloak, though it can most. You're just one loud-ass idiot beneath it. Could guess. Your father used it better." Moody said, starting toward the door.

Harry winced as he pulled his hood over himself again, realizing he'd forgotten how rough Moody's company was.

"So you got sick, ey kid?" Moody said.

Harry sighed to himself, knowing how much of an insult that was.

"Yes, sir." Harry answered simply, keeping stride with the man as they followed the group out into the orchard to escape the anti-apparation ward.

Moody sucked his tongue over his teeth and spat into the yard.

"Apic Ally is in Bristol." Moody said unexpectedly, before grabbing Harry's arm.

Oh, I wouldn't know where to apparate to, Harry realized as he landed, feeling just as stupid as Moody obviously thought he was.

Were we late?

The street was empty, but Harry hardly noticed that beside the destroyed look to it. Burned buildings lined the broken-up cobblestone road, leaning over each other like stones in a ruin. Harry gripped at his pants, desperate to feel the cloth under his hands when everything else told him that he was in Voldemort's mind again, watching a town burn after a raid. Only the smell was missing, that acrid smell of burnt hair and flesh and potions that burned inside the nostrils and choked up the throat.

Harry finally forced himself back to his equilibrium and looked around at where Order members were already splitting up and protecting the buildings on the sides of the road. He was surprised they were bothering to protect the street, and moreso that anyone was going to bother to attack it.

"Short fucker, get to spraying protection spells out your open arse or get out of here." Moody barked, his eye spinning wildly.

"Yes, sir." Harry replied, sprinting off ahead of the group to start at an abandoned-looking shop called Mistress Maple's Magical Mops Mats Maintenance and More!. Harry started off with the few fast, strong protection spells he knew before adding on every kind of booby trap 'offensive ward' he could spell onto the store. He didn't care if the empty cleaning supply building was burned down to the ground, he cared if Death Eaters were successfully killed in the process.

He'd only gotten to two more spells before he realized that only a few of the stores the Order members were protecting had offensive wards on them at all. He felt one offensive ward cast and glanced over to where he felt the magic.

Of course only Moody is the other one actually doing something here, Harry thought resentfully, watching Mrs. Weasley raise a charm against fire around a storefront.

That's going to be useless, Harry guessed before turning his attention back to the already burnt down establishment he was about to booby trap.

A large crack pulled his attention away from the ward again. Harry looked up, hoping Bill had gotten out of his meeting and come to join them.

Instead Harry found himself staring at a Death Eater in full robes staring past him.

Patrificus internus, Harry cast, holding out his hand toward the wizard surprised by the loud crack that disappeared the man away.

Did my spell land?

Why was that man even here so early?

"WE"VE BEEN SCOUTED!" Harry shouted out when he realized, running toward the strewn out Order members. "Voldemort knows we're here!"

The booby traps are going to be useless now.

"Gather together, back to back!" Moody roared.

Harry heard a crack behind himself and whirled around to see two Death Eaters running toward him, obviously unaware of him beneath his invisibility cloak.

Harry wandlessly killed them both, only breathing again when he saw

them fall. He whirled again, his eyes scanning the area for what he should do. All of the Order members were already caught fighting against one or more Death Eaters, and he knew more were going to arrive.

Why are we not apparating out of here? Harry wondered, knowing Voldemort wouldn't have had time to raise an anti-apparation ward.

Harry heard a scream and looked over to see Tonks collapse with a hard covering her bloody leg.

"Tonks!" Lupin shouted, stunning the Death Eater who'd hexed her and falling at her side, seemingly without notice of the chaos cropping up around them.

Sloppy, Harry thought as he ran across the street and killed a Death Eater about to send a spell at the pair. Finally he felt Lupin raising wards behind him and glanced back to see Tonks gritting her teeth and pulling her wand up her leg, a cauterizing spell smoking behind it.

Harry felt his stomach churn and looked away, knowing he didn't have time to feel sick.

"Alright, I'm good." Tonks said as she stood up beside him. Harry stepped forward, aware that no one but Moody knew he was fighting in the battle and hoping to keep it that way.

"Lets go!" Lupin shouted out, turning around in a circle.

"NO!" Moody shouted back even as he dodged a killing curse and sent back one of his own. "We have them out of the woodwork, lets take them down where they are!"

"How many of us are you trying to get killed, Mad-Eye?" The dark-haired Michael shouted out as he cast two shielding spells in

rapid succession to protect himself from hexes the two Death Eaters were sending at him.

We don't have time to argue right now, Harry thought in disgust, knowing someone was likely to get killed, either from the lost time or the split concentration.

"As many of you need to die to win this." Moody growled, answering Michael even as a cutting curse got through his shielding and sliced open his arm.

Patrificus internus, Harry cast at one of the three Death Eaters Moody was fighting, waiting for the man to hit the floor before he turned to the next. Moody had killed the last before Harry got to him, and Harry turned to kill the others the Order members were busy stunning and hexing.

"Ah, fuck!" Harry heard Charlie shout and spun to see George jump over where Charlie was lying on the ground to block a cutting curse. In a split second Fred was standing there too, fighting to protect George's back as his twin stunned the Death Eater attacking their brother.

Harry cast a shield over them and dove, feeling a killing curse headed at his back, probably sent toward where the three Weasleys were gathered.

Harry looked up and cast a soft punching spell toward the air around the twins, pushing them to the ground. He caught a glimpse of their scared faces as they went down and feared they'd been hit, only to see the killing curse strike the wall behind them.

Harry felt his breath come in pants as he watched the Weasleys stand and scatter back toward where Death Eaters were apparating in, all alive and moving.



I can't lose them, Harry thought, wanting to squeeze his eyes shut and concentrate on anything but the danger around him. Instead he forced himself to stand, wondering if he'd just found out where all soldiers' courage came from. He had to fight to protect his friends, and to keep from shaming himself in front of them. He'd rather die with them than stand safe and watch them die without him.

Patrificus internus, Defodio internus, Diffindo internus, Harry cast wandlessly, again and again as Death Eaters apparated in and died beneath his hand, stepping over bodies he wasn't sure he'd killed as he aimed toward the next man he'd fell. Part of a wall burst out of a building a few feet from him and smashed across the street, heading for the light-haired Order member Harry hadn't recognized in the meeting. In less than a second the man had apparated, only to appear close to where Harry stood.

"Made yourself invisible, have you?" Someone said over the noise of the wizards' fight.

Harry had barely recognized the threat in the sentence by the time he'd thrown himself on the floor, reacting by habit to the feel of a killing curse heading at him.

Someone can cast a killing curse without a known target? Harry thought as the wall behind him burst open beneath the spell. The idea was horrifying. Who could hate so completely?

Bellatrix, Harry thought, rolling out of the way of a Gut-Wrenching curse to shove an invisible hand at the masked Death Eater, feeling a strong cutting curse burst open his shield and slice into his leg even as he cast his own fatal spells.

Harry wanted to scream as his curse landed and the Death Eater split open in front of him, fatal wounds splashing blood everywhere, dark blood and something thing and stringy splattering his face. He knew better than to call attention to his invisible presence in the

battle, and he didn't have time for it anyway, Harry reminded himself, concentrating on healing his leg wound as he crawled over to pull the hood off of Bellatrix's body.

It wasn't Bellatrix, Harry saw in shock, facing a pale, light haired male corpse.

He'd have to have hated me purely for fighting against Voldemort, Harry thought as he finished cauterizing up his leg where his wound had been pulsing out blood into a pool soaking his pants. Voldemort had loyal followers whether he knew it or not. Apparently more than one truly wanted to kill everyone who fought against him.

Harry wiped his face off on his sleeve as he stood up, telling himself to step further away from the robed men he attacked with the Defodio curse. Harry glanced around the alleyway as he broke into a run, making his way further up the alleyway that was slowly filling with Death Eaters.

Wounds that didn't kill instantly were almost meaningless in a magical war, Harry figured as he watched Order members and Death Eaters alike protect each other as they healed, only to reenter the dueling.

Someone had called for backup, Harry realized as he saw more Order members fighting than had been around before. The alleyway was slowly polarizing into Death Eaters and Order members, the Death Eaters taking firm control over the lower portion of the alleyway and obviously feeling safe enough to start torching it. Harry ran to stay behind Order members as they all attacked the few Death Eaters who hadn't yet apparated down to the Death Eater's area, guessing the light-haired Death Eater had seen the light and color of his spells, and saw what point they'd lead back to. It wasn't long before the battle lulled, the Order members gathered together facing the body-strewn street and the massive numbers of Death Eaters controlling the lower portion.

Is this a good thing or not?

"GET OUT OF HERE!" Moody roared, despite the relative quiet of the street.

"Moody, what?" Charlie asked, glancing around.

"GO!" Moody roared again.

That's it, then, Harry thought before apparating to the Weasley's orchard and hoping that he'd done the right thing in obeying the crazy wizard.

He knows more than me, Harry reminded himself, pulling his cloak tight around himself as he walked toward the house, hoping he'd manage to get cleaned up and reappear in the household without anyone being the wiser.

Because I was so late the last two times, and because you all were lovely and reviewed me, I'm updating this one early. Enjoy!

~~HP~~

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How can life just be going on?, Harry thought, feeling whiplashed as he snuck open the Weasley back door and saw through the living room to the kitchen where Ron was sitting, talking to Ginny as she cooked.

"No, I know it's not fair, that's not my point." Ron growled. Harry stepped up the step from the living room to the kitchen and winced in the doorway as a creak went through the house.

"Your point is unfair." Ginny said determinedly without even looking toward where Harry stood hidden.

They haven't heard me, Harry determined, breathing in a silent sigh.

"Yeah, Ginny I'm saying I get that. He cares about us and he's having a rough time of it and I'm being an arse, bla, bla bla. But Merlin, what else am I suppose to do? I am upset, he is ignoring us, and I don't know how to be friends with a guy when he's not being friends with me. He forgot Hermione was even here for Merlin's sake. How do you do that?" Ron was saying.

He would have cared intensely about Ron's point an hour before, Harry thought as he snuck past them and made his way up the stairs. Ironically, that was the whole problem. A good friend would have shown himself and talked to Ron, but he couldn't be a good friend when he was pretty sure guts were drying on his shirt and he still had to reopen, clean, and heal the wound on his leg. Ron would have to wait, again, and for right then Harry was okay with that. He was too tired to be upset about his friends too.

The battle couldn't have lasted an hour, Harry thought again, clenching his jaw closed tight as he wiped a hand down his face, feeling blood and something squishy roll between his fingers.

Harry felt his stomach roll and walked to the bathroom without glancing at his hands, shoving his hand straight into the toilet bowl and flushing whatever residue of Death Eater he'd collected. He stared at the pink spinning water as it flushed, knowing he'd found a good time to puke and losing any need for it.

I'm starting to be real in this, Harry thought, rolling his head back on his shoulders to stare at the ceiling. He was starting to really fight, to get blood on him and feel the noise and pain and fear of it all. It didn't feel glorious or successful. It just felt loud and too fast and he knew he'd killed ten people before it all had ended, not counting the man who'd apparated away before Harry knew whether or not his spell had landed.

Where are the others? Harry thought then, wondering if they'd all apparated back to their own homes. It seemed unlikely, after such a panicked ending to the battle.

Shite, Harry cursed to himself, taking off in a sprint toward the stairs.

"Harry, what-?" Ginny started but Harry raced past her, jumping into the living room and tearing out the door, wondering if anyone but him had gotten out. Moody had been shouting for them to leave, but they never obeyed him immediately, what had he been scared of? What had happened?

What am I going to do? Harry asked himself, staring at the open orchard outside the back door. Was he supposed to apparate back into Apic Alley on the evidence that his comrades had fallen into a trap? That sounded stupid and rash in the extreme. But what else could he do? Not even Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had arrived.

Maybe they had an apparation point I didn't know about? Harry wondered desperately, wanting to scream.

For a moment he thought Ginny and Ron had bursted out screaming, until his eyes caught up with him and he saw a small pile of Order members in the orchard, all shouting together.

Harry saw Lupin appear out of the corner of his eye as he heard more shouts break apart the orchard, growing louder and more chaotic as more and more piles of fallen Order members apparated onto the cold orchard grass.

Harry scanned the crowd for the worst injured and ran up to one witch shouting for a medi-witch. He slid onto his knees beside her, seeing hot red scars blossomed over all of her showing skin. Her robes were slightly tinged, though it seemed the fabric's own protective charms had kept whatever curse from reaching it.

"Ginny!" Harry shouted as he saw Ron and Ginny tearing out of the house. "Floo Hogwarts, get Pomfry!"

"No, Ron, you do it!" Harry shouted, remembering Ginny's work in the infirmary. "Ginny, you help me!"

Ron nodded and ran off without protest, and Harry gratefully turned his attention back to the Order.

"What happened?" Harry screamed as he finished healing the witch and ran to another, only to find Ms. Weasley burnt beneath him.

"God." Harry choked, pushing everything but healing spells from his mind.

"What happened?" Harry heard Madam Pomfrey call out but didn't answer, concentrating on finishing cleaning and closing Mrs.

Weasley's wounds, ignoring her yelps of pain. As soon as her wounds were clean and out of danger of bleeding out he raced over to another's.

It was a shock when he finally looked up, his arms covered in more drying blood, to see that everyone had stopped screaming. The last Order members with wounds were sitting up and holding out burnt arms or legs away from the ground, but were mostly sitting silently. Madam Pomfrey was going over the severely wounded Harry and Ginny had tended, applying magicked salves and bandages.

"What happened?" Harry asked again, approaching Charlie who was sitting calmly on the grass with a severely burnt arm held out in front of him.

"This will sting like a bitch," Harry warned, before drawing his wand slowly over Charlie's wounds.

"There was an -AH! Bugger all! - a trap of sorts, Voldemort's bastards got us all together and sent down a potion bomb."

"A what?" Harry asked as he grabbed a bandage from the pile Pomfrey had brought and wrapped it around the burn.

"A potion bomb. You throw in one harmless potion, followed by an ingredient or second potion that makes it explode. Like what you see in any amateur potion's classroom, except weaponized. A technique only used on buildings in the last war." The light-haired Order member explained.

"Shite." Harry cursed quietly, shaking his head and moving over on his knees to help that man's wounds.

"What's your name?" Harry asked, hoping to distract the man right before he drew his wand over the large burn over both the man's legs, cleaning the dirt and potential infection out.

"Joseph, but everyone calls me Seph." The man replied.

"Harry." Harry answered, starting on the bandages.

"Sorta knew that." Seph said, gesturing to Harry's forehead.

"Right."

"Note to self, obey the mad bloke." Fred said, breathing heavily as he inspected his own bleeding hands.

"No shite." Harry heard Moody growl from where he lay on the ground. He'd been one of the severely injured.

He always leaves last, Harry remembered, looking respectfully over the man's bandaged torso and face.

"Alright, come on you lazy bastards, stop grovelling in the mud." Moody said, not even groaning as he made it to his feet.

"Let them rest, Alastor." Madam Pomfrey ordered.

To Harry's surprise, Moody obeyed, grumbling and working his way back to the house in his slow and constant limp.

"Sorry for ruining your robes, Harry." Tonks grinned as she pulled herself up from the ground, bandages over her entire torso.

Harry looked at her, confused until she pointed down and he realized the blood from the healing had soaked into the blood and filth battle had covered him in, and they didn't know he'd even been near the battle.

"It's alright." Harry said, "I'll go shower and change."



"Did you do well at least?" Harry heard Bill ask as he started toward the house, following shortly after Moody. He slowed down his walk slightly so he could listen, wondering to himself when Bill had even shown up.

"I don't know what was going on with Moody, but bodies were littering the ground by the end of it, and we lost Apic Alley again. I don't know if we should call that a success or no." Mr. Weasley replied.

Harry was glad he was faced away so he didn't have to hide his grimace. Moody and he were the only ones who'd fought to kill.

Am I supposed to be proud of that? Feel 'successful', Harry asked himself, understanding Mr. Weasley's reply.

"Moody, wait." Madam Pomfrey called suddenly, her voice tight. Harry turned back too at the tone, and saw her bent over the dark-haired wizard he'd just learned the name of.

"And Michael?" Harry asked quietly, sighing carefully at the medi-witch's gentle head shake.

"He didn't make it." Madam Pomfrey said finally, running a hand down the burnt face and covering the man's eyes. Harry wasn't sure he'd seen it correctly but he thought Michael no longer had any eyelids to close.

The quiet chatter around the group died, as everyone responded in their own way. Harry watched as Ginny closed her eyes and cleared her face of all emotion, and saw Ron quickly turn his head away from the corpse. Harry just felt disappointed; that man hadn't had to die. Why hadn't they obeyed when Moody shouted to disapparate?

"That's why you fucking stupid egg-licking currs are supposed to follow orders." Moody said before spitting in the grass and turning to keep limping toward the house.

No one replied.

"I'll tell the family." McGonagall said, standing up out of the pile of silent Order members to walk toward the house.

Harry nodded and followed, going to shower and change, knowing it wasn't long before he had to go help make lunch.

To his surprise, Ginny trotted and caught up with him, her stride strong and sure .

"If we'd been faster at healing, or had picked our patients in the right order, he wouldn't have died." She said in a hard voice.

"That's possible." Harry said, having thought of that before and dismissed it as irrelevant. He'd done the best he could, the fastest he could, through the whole battle and in healing them. Who knows what he could have done better that would have saved Michael's life. He hadn't done it and magic couldn't bring back the dead.

"Oh." Ginny said, her voice cracking slightly. Harry glanced over and sighed before wrapping a bloody arm around her shoulders, hoping the smell of drying flesh and burnt human filth on his robes didn't just make her emotions worse.

"I'm gunna go shower." Harry announced once they'd made it back to the house, heading immediately toward the steps.

"Okay." Ginny said quietly, looking around the living room. Harry didn't ask what she was looking for, knowing he probably wouldn't be able to get it for her in any case.

~~HP~~

Harry came downstairs, newly clean and feeling almost human,

albeit exhausted, to see the Weasleys gathered in the living room, seemingly waiting for him.

"Hey, Harry." George greeted tiredly, his arm pulled tight around Ginny.

Harry walked in and sat without a word, thinking silence seemed more appropriate for the day.

"Harry, we are lucky you ran outside for us, regardless of why you did so." Mr. Weasley said finally. "Who knows how many lives your speed saved. Ginny, the same to you."

Harry watched expressionless as Ginny nodded rapidly without taking her eyes from the floor.

"We did well today. Michael didn't die for nothing. We got three more names from removing masks to investigate." Bill said, looking at Harry as he spoke.

"Names." Fred scoffed.

"Names?" Harry asked hopefully.

"Marian Castlen, her husband, and Florian Fortescue." Bill answered, his face and voice expressionless.

"Florian Fortescue? The icecream vender?" Harry asked. "He was always nice to me, gave me extra icecream and I'd sit in the sun outside his shop."

"You-Know-Who wasn't alive back then." Mr. Weasley shrugged, looking regretful.

"The whole Order saw it?" Harry asked, getting nods from them all.

"It doesn't mean that he's guilty Harry, he could still be imperius'd, or it could even be a different Death Eater under polyjuice." Charlie said.

Harry nodded, understanding.

"It's still good information though, we gained something good today." Mr. Weasley replied.

"It doesn't seem good enough." Mrs. Weasley said quietly, looking out the window at the sunny yard.

"Nothing would, Molly." Mr. Weasley replied, standing up and pulling her to her feet, an arm wrapped around her shoulders.

"I'll make lunch." Harry said.

"Thank you." Mr. Weasley nodded, his attention still clearly on walking his wife outside.

~~HP~~

Harry wanted to go out after lunch but knew he couldn't afford to have left with no destination right before three Death Eaters were killed. He had to wait, so he putted around the house, unable to get the feeling of dried blood off his face and the taste of it off his lips and tongue and not allowed to study or exercise to make it go away. For the first time in days he was severely glad there weren't more hours in the day to be spent not studying or fighting. It was the quiet hours that he hated.

"I'm going to Hogwarts to see Snape." Harry announced to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley who were sitting on the back porch together. Unsurprisingly, they both stared at him in shock.

"I have remedial potions with him today." Harry said, carefully

wording it so as not to imply that Snape was actually teaching him anything.

"Right." Mr. Weasley said finally, nodding at him. "Take the floo."

"Okay," Harry replied, walking inside and wondering if Mr. Weasley mentioned the floo as opposed to apparating.

Does he know I can do that? Harry wondered to himself, not sure if he should care either way.

He flood into the Three Broomsticks under his invisibility cloak, knowing all the Hogwarts floos would be closed for break and were protected by passwords in any case.

Could I get past the password ward now? Harry wondered as he stopped into the empty bar and nodded to Tom, only realizing after the man didn't reply that he was still invisible.

Only if they allowed some to not have the password, Harry guessed, knowing he had to shift his magical signature to appear to be someone else, and if no one was allowed to get through the ward without the code-

Someone would have to set the password, there's the real keyhole. I could make make the ward think I'm that wizard and get through without knowing the actual code at all, since if the magic designates me as the man who made the ward and set the word in the first place, Harry realized, deciding even as he thought it that he didn't want to go back and floo into Gryffindor Tower. He wanted the walk.

Harry stepped into the Hogsmeade streets and headed toward the trainstation, glad to feel the warm, clean air in his hair.

Today was so hectic, Harry thought, barely able to remember when he'd woken up that morning. His thoughts shied away from

contemplating the battle, from the flash of noise and speed and blood that he hated.

How am I supposed to deal with that? Harry asked himself, wondering if he even had anything to deal with. He'd killed before, but for some reason this felt fundamentally different. A better act, maybe, but Harry wasn't even sure about that; he'd killed so many, so violently.

Harry felt his stomach roll up toward his throat and swallowed heavily. He tasted blood slip down his throat and leaned off the road, spitting clear saliva into the grass.

The night killings didn't seem nearly as violent. The Death Eaters just stopped, they didn't – Harry rolled his head up on his shoulders and stared at the clear sky as he forced his stomach back down.

I hate this war, he thought, wanting to curl up in a small closet and cry.

Harry looked up at the castle he was heading toward and sighed. He didn't want to meet with Snape anymore. Really he never had, he'd just wanted to get away from doing nothing, and now he didn't want to do anything.

He's being tortured, Harry reminded himself, though he wasn't sure if that was even true anymore, or even if Snape was loyal and if he was supposed to care about his welfare at all.

All I need to do is sit in his office to stop it, Harry told himself, forcing his feet forward, even as he wondered if he was being stupid for even considering going alone to meet with the slimy bastard he'd never been given reason to trust.

I just want to do something peaceful, Harry thought, wiping his hand down his face.

I'll ward myself and pay attention, Harry decided, walking toward Hogwarts's heavy magic. Snape would be foolish in the extreme to attack him within the Hogwarts's wards, and Harry didn't think Snape was a fool.

~~HP~~

It was only after Harry had made it to Snape's office and knocked that he realized he had no reason to expect the professor to be there.

"Enter." The disdainful voice called out from inside as always.

Harry pushed open the door slowly and stopped inside.

Snape's office was huge because it doubled as a potion's lab, Harry understood, looking at where the man was standing behind one of the large tables, peering into a caldron with intimidating intensity.

"Hello, professor." Harry greeted once he was sure he wasn't going to startle or distract the man.

"Mr. Potter." Snape drawled without looking up.

Harry was grateful Snape was mostly ignoring him, glad to have time to clear his shocked expression to something more dignified.

Snape looked terrible. His hair was greasier than ever and lay flat against his cheeks, threatening to drip. His skin looked sickly, pale and porous with sweat and hung around his tired eyes in a way Harry wished he'd never seen.

"It's Friday, sir. We're meeting for potions are we not?" Harry said, standing with his hands clasped behind his back.

"8:00 I believe it would be, Mr. Potter, had you not missed

Wednesday. I judged you disinterested for your winter holiday." The man said.

Harry winced, hearing the accusation in that. It looked like the man had been tortured because he'd wanted a holiday. Where had he even been on Wednesday? He'd been studying, Harry remembered, studying and he'd forgotten about the fake remedial potions lessons.

Potions lessons which keep a man from being tortured, Harry thought, watching Snape grab a jar of something from the ingredients lined up on the table beside him.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I should have been here." Harry said.

"You do not need to inform me of that fact, Mr. Potter." Snape said, finally looking up from the potion to sneer at Harry directly and gesture him toward a chair.

"Yes, sir." Harry said as he sat and wiped a hand down his face, listening to the quietly hissing potion and understanding that he'd screwed himself again. He hadn't brought a text because he wasn't supposed to study anymore, and now he was left in silence again.

The hissing sounded like pain, Harry thought, groaning and standing up to pace back and forth between the tables in the large room. He hated fighting, he decided. Hated all of it, but he hated the silence afterward more than anything. He wanted to go and make the Death Eaters just stop the way he and the world needed them to.

"Stop prattling about, Potter." Snape said as he opened the jar with one hand and sprinkled the papery leaves into his cauldron.

"Yes, sir." Harry replied, choosing a place by the window to watch the clouds form around each other. As a child he'd always loved to lie in the bushes behind the Dursleys house where no one could find him and watch the clouds roll above him. In a moment Harry had shifted



to not have his back to the Death Eater, leaning against the wall beside him and splitting his attention between the magic within the room and the clouds outside it. Become a wizard hadn't saved his life the way he'd thought it had. Suddenly he was rich, famous, and powerful, and now he was using all of it to kill.

"Tell me, Mr. Potter, do you get this way every time the world does not shower you with rainbows?" Snape drawled from behind him.

"Yes sir." Harry answered calmly, drawing a hand down his face and wiping it on his trousers before he drew his fingers through his hair. He grabbed a handful of hair at the back of his neck and pulled on it slightly, wishing his mind would let him relax after the day's hell.

He just wanted to sleep, Harry decided, looking up to stare at the potion's office's gray-stained ceiling.

"Potter." Snape barked.

Harry looked over calmly to find himself staring at Snape as the Professor set up a chess board.

"E4." Harry acknowledged, staring at the window, guessing he'd be able to remember the board and still play, and for once he didn't care if he won.

"E5." Snape answered, a distinctive click announcing his move on the board.

"Knight to F3."

"When did you learn to play blindfolded?" Snape asked. "Knight to C6."

"I never have." Harry replied. "Bishop to C4."

"Rash without skill." Snape scoffed. "As I predicted, you would grow up to be. Bishop to C5."

"B4" Harry replied.

"Bishop takes at B4"

"Pawn to C3." Harry sighed.

"Bishop to C5."

"I castle kingside."

"D6."

"D4." Harry said, a small smile starting over his face as his brain focused on the clean activity, the hissing caldron quieting to nothing in the back of his head.

"E pawn to D4." Snape replied expressionlessly.

"C pawn to D4."

"Bishop to B6"

"D 5."

"Knight to A5."

"Bishop to E2."

"Knight to E7."

"Bishop to B2." Harry said, looking up at the clouds outside again.

"F6."

"Queen to D2."

"I castle. Why did you come here?" Snape asked. Harry looked over to see Snape staring at him and quickly turned his face back to the window.

"Knight to D4. What do you mean?"

"Knight to G6. I'm not an idiot, Potter, and I don't appreciate associating with them. I meant what I asked."

"I came because I remembered it was Friday and I can not come at 8:00 tonight. King to H1." Harry said, not wanting to give Snape the emotional reasons behind it, and not knowing what it was wise to say to the potential spy in any case.

"Bishop to D7. You are lying, Mr. Potter."

"F4. Not entirely, Professor." Harry said, grinning as he acknowledged his partial lie.

"C5."

"Knight to C2."

"Rook to C8. You can play blindfolded." Snape acknowledged, sounding respectful for once.

"Knight b to A3." Harry replied, not sure what else he could say that wouldn't sound obnoxious.

"Bishop to C7."

"Rook a to E1."

"Rook to E8."

"Bishop to F3."

"B5."

"F5. Why did you ask though? You are always the man that doesn't care why I do what I do, you assume it's for the worst." Harry asked finally, staring out the window and wondering why he didn't even care about the answer. Snape usually got him all up in arms. Harry glanced down at where his hands were clasped together in front of his waist and sighed. He wasn't even putting any emotion into the game he was playing.

"Knight to E5." Snape said. Harry nodded, allowing Snape to disregard the question.

"Knight to E3."

"B4. Perhaps I am beginning to wonder why you do what you do." Snape said finally.

"What is it that you think that I do? Bishop to E5." Harry asked carefully.

"Rook to E5." Snape replied, his voice dull.

"You've begun to respect me, Professor. Knight A to C4" Harry said.

"Sounds unlikely. Knight to C4." Snape replied.

"So it does. Knight to C4." Harry replied.

"Rook to E7."

"Queen to F4."

"Bishop to B5."

"Bishop to E2."

"Bishop to C4."

"Bishop to C4."

"I suspect you do more than your friends know, and less than you believe. Rook to E5."

"Sounds perfectly possible. Rook to F3." Harry replied, shaking his head and watching someone make their way across the grass below him. It was strange to think he was actually still in the dungeons, looking through a magical image of what was actually happening much above him.

"Queen to D7."

"Rook to G3."

"Rook c to E8."

Harry ambled over to the table where Snape sat with the board, glancing at it once to confirm the image he held in his head. He remembered where all the pieces were, but it was the image of them that he needed to place chess.

Something I haven't trained my mind to do, Harry recognized.

"Queen to G4." Harry decided before returning to his place by the window.

"Rook 8 to E7."

"H4."

"Queen to E8. You've become at least a little humble, Mr. Potter. The change is evident. Apparently there was a use for your godfather's death." Snape said.

Harry jerked his head over to see Snape's blank expression.

Was that a compliment or an insult? Harry wondered, not amused.

"There were many uses for his death. H5." Harry replied, his voice hard.

"King to H8. There weren't many, but I believe I see your point." Snape replied.

The hell was my point? Or is he apologizing? Harry wondered, before throwing the thought out of his head. He was in no mood for mind games.

"Rook e to E3." Harry replied, keeping his voice emotionless.

"Bishop to D8." Snape said, even as he stood up and walked over to his caldron to stir it carefully.

"H6."

"G5." Snape said once he'd gotten back to his seat. Harry listened to him sit down and shook his head.

"En Passant G6." Harry said, leaning deeply against the wall behind him and closing his eyes.

"If it was in fact the fugitive's death that made your company bearable, I believe all of Hogwarts would agree he did not die in vain. He made you less of a fool, as unexpected result of his presence.

Rook to E4."

" Queen to F3. What says I'm less of a fool?" Harry scoffed.

"En Passant G6? That's not a fool's move and I know it. One of multiple wise moves you've made today. Off day is it? Rook to H4. Check."

"Horrid day. King to G1. So this is to test me, is it?" Harry asked, wanting to roll his eyes.

"Rook takes at E3, and if you thought anything other than that you're more of a fool than I expected"

"Queen takes at E3. And why do you suddenly give if I'm actually the fool you've expected me to be?"

"This is the first time you've suggested yourself not to be." Snape drawled. "Queen takes at E3. Check."

"Rook to E3. I was not a fool when I was taking note of what you were saying in first year and you mocked me for it, Professor." Harry replied calmly.

"And yet you were foolish enough to take such offense at the slight as to never take note of what I said again." Snape said, sounding almost smug. "Pawn takes at G6."

"Am I not doing the same now? Rook to E8. Check." Harry asked, smiling to himself.

"So it would seem. What's changed is your manner of doing so. King to H7. The question remains of why it has so changed. "

"Rook to D8. A good man died and I set myself to never making that my fault again." Harry replied, keeping his eyes closed and his face

clear as he admitted the truth.

"Then you've failed at the outset. In war another good man's death will be your fault eventually. Rook to C4"

"Today specifically. Rook to D6." Harry said, guessing he had indeed messed up in the order of people he'd healed. He'd stopped looking up for the worst off, simply panicking from one patient to the next, and Michael had died without making a noise.

"You were stupid? Rook to D4." Snape asked.

"Rook to F6. Inexperienced." Harry admitted, shaking his head.

"Rook to D5. That's always unpleasant." Snape said, his voice faraway.

"Rook to F7. Check, and yes it is." Harry replied, sighing.

"You'll get used to it. King to H6."

"I have little doubt. What I don't know is who I'll be when I'm used to it. Rook to A7." Harry admitted, liking to be able to say his thoughts aloud.

"Like me, perhaps. C4." Snape said.

Harry opened his eyes and saw Snape's mouth jerk.

"King to F2. That's terrifying beyond all reason." Harry replied, closing his eyes again.

"But true. Rook to D2. Check." Snape replied.

"King to F3. At least I know you'll still be uglier than me, even after I'm as much of a bastard." Harry said, letting his mouth drop into a



lopsided grin.

"That's not saying much. C3." Snape replied.

Snape has a sense of humor? Harry thought to himself, his grin stretching across his face.

"I've learned to take what I can get. Rook to B7." Harry said.

"Whores, Mr. Potter? C2." Snape drawled. Harry barked out a laugh.

Woah.

"I was hoping I could do a little better than you, Professor. Rook to C7." Harry replied, still grinning.

"Rook to D3. Check. Umbrage perhaps?" Snape drawled.

"I think I'd prefer the whore. King to E2." Harry said.

"Rook to C3. I believe we have for once come to an agreement, Mr. Potter." Snape replied, his voice emotionless. Harry grinned.

"I forfeit." Harry said, knowing the game had finished and he had lost moves before.

"Good game, Mr. Potter." Snape said, every word sounding respectful, though Harry wasn't sure whether or not anyone could ever trust Snape's tone to match what he meant.

"Good game." Harry replied, walking over to shake Snape's hand.

Snape shook his hand and nodded, his eyes studying Harry's face.

"I should go." Harry said finally, rubbing his hands together to warm them in the chill room.

"As you will." Snape replied.

~~HP~~

Harry made it back to the Weasleys and flopped down on his bed. He'd left Snape's too soon. He had another three hours before dinner.

Damn it how can a day go so slowly?

He'd gone all day pretending to be more than he was. First pretending to know what he was doing with warding magic, only to pretend he knew what to do in a damn battle, to pretend he belonged in the violence, to pretend he was more than the irrational, stupid rash ugly child that Snape saw. Now he had to pretend he had any damn clue what he was doing in the war, unsure the deaths he caused were even progressing toward anything.

Harry woke at Mrs. Weasley's call for dinner, only realizing as he sat up, groaning at his newborn headache, that he'd gone to sleep in his clothes.

"Ugh." Harry groaned aloud, feeling the old sweat in his now-rumpled robes. He'd shower and change after dinner, he decided as he stumbled toward the stairs, rubbing at his eyes.

"You okay, Harry?"

Harry turned quickly at the voice and saw Ron looking at him worriedly.

"Alright." Harry answered, blinking at the first civil words Ron had said to him since the start of break. Ron nodded quickly and rushed down the steps in front of him.

Harry nodded to himself, hoping things would be getting better now. They'd certainly shared enough drama over the holiday for his taste.

Dinner was quiet, quieter than Harry thought he'd ever known at a Weasley meal. Mrs. Weasley spent most of it with her hand in Mr.

Weasley's, glancing around quietly as if searching for something to strengthen her nerves. Hermione was apparently already gone, Harry noted silently.

The funeral was scheduled for the next morning, and Charlie said he was planning to leave right after. Mrs. Weasley sniffled and nodded at the announcement, told him he'd be missed, and left anything else unsaid.

Mrs. Weasley told them all that she'd handle the dishes, and at Mr. Weasley's encouraging nod, the rest of the family split up throughout the house.

Harry went to find one of the older Weasley sons and found Charlie and Ginny sitting in the hallway in front of Bill and Charlie's room, playing Magic McJacks.

"I wouldn't go in there if I were you." Charlie grinned, gesturing with his head toward the bedroom.

"Sex?" Harry asked, sitting beside the board and wanting to grin as he saw Ginny start to blush and realized that if it weren't for the war he'd have been blushing right beside her.

"Worse, wedding plans." Charlie laughed.

"I'm looking for something to do." Harry announced honestly, glancing around at the hallway lined with moving photos of the Weasley's extended family.

"Two player game." Ginny winced.

"We could switch to Exploding Snap." Charlie offered. Harry started shaking his head, seeing Ginny's disappointed look.

"No, it's alright. I'm just-" Harry stopped himself, glancing at Ginny.

I shouldn't remind her of the healing by talking about the war, Harry noted, remembering the ashen expression she'd held only hours before.

"Let me get you a book." Charlie offered, already standing up.

"I can't study any more today. Health." Harry refused, grimacing.

"Can't read or can't study?" Charlie asked, tilting his head slightly with the question.

"In my world, what's the difference?" Harry chuckled. He hadn't read a fiction book in years, since he'd spent his time hiding from the Dursleys looking at clouds and reading about three-headed dogs.

"You're looking for something to do." Charlie shrugged.

"True." Harry accepted, thinking he'd enjoyed the books back then but guessing they'd probably just seem young to him now that he knew that three-headed dogs existed and that music put them to sleep.

"I'll go grab a few, you take my turn at McJacks." Charlie said, starting toward the stairs.

"I'm terrible at-" Harry started before shaking his head, seeing the man already bounding up the steps.

Harry threw the magical ball to the floor, trying to ignore the interesting magic that made the ball turn into a tiny, intricate sculpture of a parachuting Irishman that then divebombed to the ground while he attempted to pick up the small mooing cattle figures on the hallway floor. The Irishman shattered and reassembled itself, already shouting and shaking its fist at him, before he'd picked up more than six of the little cows.

"Wow, you are terrible." Ginny said, laughing.

"Yeah..." Harry said, mock wincing, glad to see her happier and even more glad to hear Charlie bounding back to them.

"Right, so where am I at?" Charlie asked as he unshrunk three books into his hands.

"Harry just lost for you." Ginny replied.

"Oh excellent." Charlie said, almost cheerfully.

"Sorry." Harry said looking up at him and shrugging slightly.

"No worries, winning against Ginny would have made too weird of a change of pace anyway." Charlie said.

"Oh well, in that case, you're welcome, anytime." Harry replied, smiling gently back at the game and wishing he could get further into the banter and forget about the deaths waiting for him when they went to bed.

"Gracious of you, Harry, really." Charlie said, shaking his head before squatting down beside them.

"Alright, here are the best options I've got from the books I left here. We've got Hamlet by the old muggle William Shakespeare, To Kill a Mockingbird, and White Fang, a book by Jack London about a wolf."

"A wolf?" Harry asked as he took the three.

"The same." Charlie shrugged. "It's actually a very serious and rather beautiful novel. I enjoyed it a lot."

"To Kill a Mockingbird." Harry read aloud from the cover as he shifted

the three books in his arms. "What does that mean?"

"Read it, it'll tell you." Charlie smiled.

"I'll start with the wolf." Harry said, nodding at them both and turning to the first page even as he started down the stairs. It felt better to have the soft pages of a book in his hands. He could feel his mind focusing, preparing to read. He made it back outside with his invisibility cloak and sat on the side-porch step, hoping the household would forget about him and go to sleep thinking he was inside.

Dark spruce forest frowned on either side the frozen waterway. The trees had been stripped by a recent wind of their white covering of frost, and they seemed to lean towards each other, black and ominous, in the fading light. A vast silence reigned over the land. The land itself was a desolation, lifeless, without movement, so lone and cold that the spirit of it was not even that of sadness. There was a hint in it of laughter, but of a laughter more terrible than any sadness—a laughter that was mirthless as the smile of the sphinx, a laughter cold as the frost and partaking of the grimness of infallibility. It was the masterful and incommunicable wisdom of eternity laughing at the futility of life and the effort of life.

He looked up, staring out at the cold orchard, watching his breath come out in a thin veil. He had a moment to relax and read, Harry thought, smiling lightly to himself and breathing out his first relaxed breath in weeks. Just sit, just let his mind form the image the author was painting, and think of nothing else for a few precious pages.

He left when the last light in the home was noxed out. He walked first across the orchard to get away from the anti-apparation wards and out of earshot before he apparated himself into Hogsmeade.

Mrrowerl was waiting for him, Harry saw with relief as he jogged invisible across the school grounds and saw the thestral already

trotting toward him.

He wished intensely in that moment that he was skilled enough to leap onto the animal's back at its pace, rather than having to spread his hands in front of him like a fool and calm the animal so he could mount, clambering onto its back like a small muggle child at a pony ride.

Other skill to learn one day, Harry told himself when he'd finally gotten himself safe behind the animal's wings. Mrrowerl took off on his own, cantering beside the forbidden forest and leaping into the air. Without a word from him the creature turned in the air, flying over the castle toward Hogsmeade.

"You heading toward Marian Castlan's?" Harry asked him, receiving a dry-sounding growl in return.

"Right." Harry replied, having no idea whether the sound was supposed to be meaningful or not.

The wind in his hair felt as great as ever, the feeling capturing wild and free in a way he didn't think anything but flying could mean to him, but somehow it wasn't as happy of a feeling as it had always been before. It was more austere now, more simple, just a pleasant feeling in his hair as he headed toward another terrible deed in the name of a terrible war that he'd shoved himself into.

And somehow this means I'm bettering the world, Harry thought, almost wanting to laugh at the sick irony as he landed at a quiet, linoleum-sided, distinctly-muggle looking house in a distinctly muggle-looking neighborhood.

The wards over the place told a different story, Harry thought, patting a hand down Mrrowerl's mane in thanks for the trip. He didn't want to leave the warm animal's side, but he knew he had a needed experiment to run.



He walked himself up closer to the wards and stood just outside them, settling himself in to stand for as long as he needed to find all of the different wards' common keyhole.

He stepped through successfully and felt his heart sink, knowing better than to wish that he'd failed and yet hating the results of his good magic. It was as Bill said; he could simply walk inside.

He got to the front door and felt like knocking. It was difficult to bring his hand to the doornob and simply open it, though all of the magical locks opened for him like he owned the whole place. He didn't own it, Harry thought as he carefully stepped inside the front foyer, casting silencing spells over the wood floor. The house was a stranger's, he didn't even know where the bedroom was, and he couldn't feel more out of place.

Necessary, Harry reminded himself, tossing his strange feelings away from his duty as he silenced the hinges on the door and pushed it closed. He cast the spell on the carpet on the staircase and slowly began his silent way upstairs, barely breathing despite the magic that would keep him from being heard. He was silenced and invisible, Harry knew, he could run around the entire house screaming if he wished and no one would wake from it, but still he crept up the stairs and kept to the walls, inching his way over the landing and toward the only door on the left, guessing it would be the master bedroom.

Harry pushed the bedroom door open and heard it squeak, wincing and casting silencing spells too late.

Think, then move! Harry chastised himself, watching the sleeping couple and praying they hadn't woken or heard.

I could probably kill them before they spoke, Harry thought, before closing his eyes at the sick thought. He didn't want to have anything

to do with that reality.

They're asleep, Harry thought stupidly, staring at where the witch's arm crossed over the man's chest, her Dark Mark contrasting terribly with the man's light skin. Harry only had to glance down at the where the husband's arm sat on top of the heavy blanket to see that he was a Death Eater as well. Harry could even feel the magic of the tattoos, pulsing lightly within the ward magic in the home.

The right house, Harry thought, silently thanking Mrrowerl as he stared at the couple.

Am I just supposed to do this? Harry asked, taking out his wand and wondering how fake the corpses would look, draped over each other so artistically. Another thought he wanted nothing to do with.

Patrificus Internus, Harry cast, barely glancing at the suddenly still couple before he shuffled down against the wall to sit on their floor, staring at the edge of the bed he couldn't see over. Their blanket was light brown and designed with black almost flowery curls, draped over the side of the bed and covering it down to the tan rug on the wooden floor.

It was necessary, Harry told himself, wanting to cry.

It was too much for one day. Too much death and killing and emotion. He didn't want to deal with any of it anymore, didn't want to ever wake up if the next morning meant more of that day. This was what he was supposed to wake up for, a day of research, violence and bloody failed healing and a night of reading muggle fiction, only to stand up and walk into a home to kill couples in their sleep? He sounded more like a subject of night terrors than any kind of boy or man.

Harry sighed and stood up, pulling himself out of dramatics and spelling his resting spot sanitary, unsure whether the Ministry or the

Death Eaters or both would be pursuing him when word of the killings got out, but not wanting to leave any clues for either, nothing but a pink and white plastic little My-Little-Pony.

He returned outside, only to walk straight past the thestral to puke in the bushes away from the home. There was something different about killing in a home, killing men asleep, killing women asleep, that he hadn't prepared himself for, Harry thought as he spat onto the ground.

I'm going to become such a fucking monster by the end of this, Harry guessed, putting a hand on Mrrowerl's back to steady himself as he cast the ground clean.

But I'm going to win, he thought, pulling himself aggressively onto Mrrowerl's back and focusing on Florian Fortescue.

~~HP~~

He didn't look at Mr. Fortescue's face as he killed him, and it was only another death and another cast doll. He didn't have to scream or puke again, he discovered thankfully. The man's Dark Mark and the lack of any trace of Imperius curse was motive enough for the rest. All he had to do was walk out of the colorful house afterwards and thank the thestral, think about the Weasley's and apparate his way home.

Only when he got into bed that night did he remember that he'd never reopened the wound on his leg to heal it correctly and that it was too late then. He could open and heal it again, but it would scar just the same. He lay down to sleep, thinking that by the end of the war, if he ever ended it, he would have little reason to care that his leg was now ugly and scarred.

He had a bad dream that night. He was in a hallway, with moving portraits of agonized, Dark Marked men on both sides, obviously

screaming though he couldn't hear a sound. All he could hear was the sound of children crying, and though he ran through the hall to help them, he couldn't find a thing, and every time the hallway turned it onto brought him to another stretch of hallway, and everything turned around itself and the men in the portraits contorted themselves in their screams and the children wouldn't stop sobbing and wanting to be found and he could do nothing but run and try to turn his eyes from the portraits only to see another on the other side, yelling and writhing and all unable to get out.

He woke up panting that he was sorry, that he didn't mean it, though he didn't know what he was supposed to be sorry about. He thought that was glad he'd had one bad dream after the killing. He didn't want to be a man who'd walked through it all untouched. It would feel disrespectful and cruel somehow; somehow would make it worse that he'd killed them, if he didn't kill them and then dream.

When he woke again, Mr. Weasley was calling for breakfast, and the whole house smelled like bread, and his stomach rumbled. Harry wasn't at all sure what to feel or to tell himself, except that nothing mattered as long as the necessary was done, and it was done, so he could eat.

"Harry," Ron and Charlie called as soon as he entered the room. Harry looked between them, his eyebrows raised.

"You go first." Ron grumbled, shrugging at Charlie.

"Lance just owled me about the questions you had for him. He thinks acting disrespectfully will help, but warns you not to lose too much of Rashennon's respect." Charlie said.

Who's Rashennon?

"Who's Rashennon?" Mr. Weasley asked aloud. Charlie just shook his head and met Harry's eyes.

Sphinx, Harry remembered.

Perfect. He needed to learn Legilimency, he needed to know whether or not Snape was loyal. The man was one of Voldemort's most trusted, he either needed to give the Opposition information, or die quickly.

"Excellent. After the funeral." Harry said, nodding and sitting down.

"You'll find him? I still don't understand that whatsoever." Charlie asked, sounding worried.

"I'll find him." Harry said.

"Alright." Charlie agreed, nodding confidently and shrugging before turning back to his food.

"Ron?" Harry asked, accepting a plate of food from Mrs. Weasley.

"Wanna game of Wizard's Chess after the funeral?" Ron asked awkwardly, looking between him and Charlie and already looking disappointed.

Harry winced and shook his head.

"After my meeting." Harry promised.

"Yeah." Ron muttered, shaking his head and turning back to his food.

We go to the funeral, I go to Hogwarts and take Mrrowerl to meet Rashanon, I play chess with Ron and then study until night, and I'll see if I'm given anymore names before I go to bed.

"Wait," Harry realized, before casting a silencing bubble over Charlie and he. "I thought Rashanon was female, the sphinx I met at the

maze was female."

Charlie tilted his head to the side.

"Huh. That's strange, no, the sphinx Dumbledore or whoever won the loyalty of was Rashanon, a black-maned white-tail."

"White-tail?" Harry asked.

"It means Alfa, essentially. In gorillas the silver-back is the largest, leader of the pack. It's a mystery why some sphinxes pack and some don't, but the Alfas and the ones who travel alone are called 'white-tails'. I'm sure you can guess why."

"Right." Harry nodded. "So who was the female sphinx I met?"

"No idea, but be careful, Harry. Lance says a sphinx pushing into your mind can be extremely painful or you could have no idea it was happening, just depending on what the sphinx wants. I don't know what the consequences of that would be, and you don't even know this sphinx?"

"I'm doing it." Harry declared. "I can't fight a war having no idea whether or not I'm being betrayed at every turn."

"It's been done." Charlie argued.

"But not by me. By people trained to do it right. I could lose this entire war for everyone with information I already have, and yet I can't win it without getting help." Harry said.

"Let me ask you this, are you being rash?" Charlie asked.

Yes. Damn.

"Yes." Harry admitted, sighing and slowing himself down. "Do you

think research would help?"

"Researching what, sphinxes or legilimency. Legilimency would be worthless if you're hoping to learn it directly from a sphinx, but researching sphinxes would be useless. Lance has worked with a few but even he says he does not understand their ways and does not pretend to. No wizard does. He said sphinxes have a different manner about them, a different way of speaking, that we don't relate to. Everything is stillness and riddles, he said."

"It could help me from making some huge mistake that offends him." Harry said.

"It could, if there were any research to study, but there's not and anyway, I thought you wanted to be making huge mistakes like that?" Charlie said.

"Well then why are you telling me I'm being rash?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow at the man.

Charlie blushed a little and rubbed a hand down his face.

"Good point. Damn, I make no sense. You need to know legilimency, and this is the best way of going about that. Alright, go, but don't get your face torn off, okay?"

"Not planning on it." Harry grinned, before cancelling the silencing charm.

"Harry!" Mrs. Weasley chastised immediately. "Silencing spells at table are very rude."

Oh.

"Sorry, Mrs. Weasley." Harry apologized, nodding his head at her slightly, "I didn't realize."

"It's alright dear. I know we're all shaken up today." Mrs. Weasley sighed, reaching over to squeeze his shoulder.

Oh right, the funeral, Harry remembered, realizing he'd forgotten to be upset about it.

It'd seem fake to think too much about it now, Harry figured, sighing at how jaded that idea made him feel.

He ate the rest of the meal in silence and trotted up to Ron's room to change into his better, black robes for the funeral.

They portkeyed together to a large orchard Harry didn't recognize. The empty stretch of long grass and scattered trees seemingly went on forever, reaching as far as he could see in every direction.

"Where are we?" Harry asked, spinning in a slow circle in the beautiful, open field. He could feel safe here, where no one could hide behind doorways or shopfronts.

"The funeral, dear." Mrs. Weasley replied, squeezing his shoulder from behind him.

"Brighton." George said quietly after Mrs. Weasley had walked out of earshot.

"Thanks." Harry replied equally quietly, following after him toward a group of wizards behind them, gathered around a red and black coffin. In moments the area was covered with arriving wizards, all walking with them in silence, gathering in a large circle around the coffin.

A woman began to sing, though Harry couldn't see her in the crowd.

"Do not stand at my grave and weep



I am not there. I do not sleep.  
I am a thousand winds that blow.  
I am the diamond glints on snow.  
Do not stand at my grave and cry;  
I am not there. I did not die."

At this Harry heard a man take over, his voice deep and clear.

"I am the sunlight on ripened grain.  
I am the gentle autumn rain.  
When you awaken in the morning's hush  
I am the swift uplifting rush  
Of quiet birds in circled flight.  
I am the soft stars that shine at night.  
Do not stand at my grave and cry;  
I am not there. I did not die."

Harry found himself wanting to cry as he heard others in the large group start to break down and turned around to stare at the clear, empty field. At the smell of burning he turned and saw the coffin in the center of the group engulfed in surprisingly sweet-smelling flames. He stood with the group in silence as they watched the magic fire consume the hidden body. The flames slowly changed colors, looking like a kind of small sunset as it died to the ground, the smoke clearing to reveal a small tree growing out of the ground where the coffin had been before.

"And done." George whispered, backing up to stand beside Harry.

"This is all? We leave?" Harry asked, stepping back and watching as wizards walked up to pat or stroke the sapling and cry.

"What else would we do?" Fred asked somberly, shaking his head.

"Let's apparate out over there." Bill said, gesturing away from the mourning wizards.

"Alright." Harry agreed, seeing Dumbledore pat a crying witch on the back and start to walk away as well.

"I'll side-along you Harry." George offered.

"Not a problem." Harry refused, shaking his head.

"Of course." George agreed quietly.

They landed back in the Weasley orchard and started toward the home.

"And done." Fred said to George in front of them. Harry watched George nod and mirrored the action.

"And Rashenon." Harry remembered, sighing and shaking himself out of his somber mood. He had to go and act a fool for a while.

"Good luck, Harry." Charlie said, looking worried.

"I'll be alright." Harry promised, holding up his hands.

~~HP~~

Harry found Mrrowerl standing just inside the forest for him, staring straight at him.

"Come here, Mrr." Harry called, holding his hand out.

The creature just growled at him slightly.

Harry rolled his head back on his shoulders in frustration before drawing his wand across his forearm, cutting it deep enough to let blood roll out down to drip between his fingers.

Mrrowerl came trotting out, chirping happily, and clamped his mouth around the wound.

This may not have been wise, Harry thought, feeling the sharp teeth fit around his forearm. To his surprise the pain from the wound started to numb, until it disappeared entirely.

Well at least it'll kill me painlessly, Harry thought, petting his right hand down the animal's sharp neck.

"Alright, Mrrowerl, feel like not killing me?" Harry wondered aloud, pulling his arm back and feeling teeth catch against his skin.

To his relief, Mrrowerl released him, its eye glaring at him horribly.

"I'd like you to find someone for me." Harry requested, casting his arm healed and clean and running his hand over the animal's blood streaked.

The thestral backed up, its teeth already bared, its mouth stained red from the meal. Harry pulled his hands up to the sides at the sight and backed himself up.

"Okay, no." Harry answered and saw the thestral calm back down, its tail thrashing the only sign of its continued temper.

"Why not now?" Harry asked, stretching his hand out to pet at the thestral's hard bone face, gently rubbing over the thin slits that made its nose.

"Just not Rashennon?" Harry asked, but received no answer beside the animal's flicking tail and slight growl-whimper.

The hell does that sound mean? Harry wondered, unsure if he was being foolish trying to speak to the creature, or if it were just as wise or wiser than he. It was damn hard to tell in a creature with a bone

face.

Harry heard a growl come from the forest and backed up quickly, knowing it was not the sound of a thestral.

Damn forbidden forest, he thought, hoping his invisibility cloak would shield him as it didn't from the thestrals.

In a moment Harry heard a roar of broken sticks and racing hooves in the forest, loudening as it approached. Harry backed up, recognizing the sound of a stampeding thestral herd, and unsure what was going on.

In seconds the thestrals had burst from the trees and slowed themselves, wings flapping, behind Mrrowerl, all spinning to face back into the forest where the growl had come from.

Harry walked slowly into the thestral pack, wondering if he were being a great fool for walking into a agitated herd of the animals, though he felt safe with them. He wanted to see what was coming at them, and if he could protect them.

The thestral pack started backing up together, their wings flapping in the air and their growls and yipps coming out together. They sounded like a group of hunting wolves, Harry thought, glancing around at the beautiful and deadly creatures.

The growl came back from the forest, and Harry watched as a thick shadow started making its way forward, finally pulling out of the brush to show a dark mane. For a moment Harry thought a man was playing a trick on them, walking out of the forest with some costume over his body, but he quickly realized that the shadow was no such thing. The animal pushed a paw out of the brush onto the sparse grass, and Harry saw that it was both very large, and very real.

Rashenon, Harry wanted to say aloud, seeing the sphinx walk out, its

body slowly working its way out of the forest, every step it took forward pushing the thestral herd back until Harry was standing beside Mrrowerl in front of them all.

The sphinx's dark mane was twisted in the front to form two large locks hanging beside his face, but other than that the creature's hair and body was all lion, all large predator. The sphinx had a small black beard that got lost into his mane, and light, almost yellow eyes that didn't fit at all with the rest of his body. Harry watched in fascination as the muscled body slowly folded over itself and sat just outside the forest, the very attractive, very male human face never glancing away from him.

"Thanks mate" Harry said, patting Mrrowerd on its withers.

Okay, so fool now, Harry reminded himself, trying to figure out what he would have done years before. He'd certainly been fool enough back then.

"I have a proposition for you, Mr. Potter." The sphinx said, its attractive human face opening to show the sharp row of teeth of a carnivore.

"A word problem?" Harry asked, trying to sound overly excited.

"No, England has too many of those already." The sphinx replied without looking away from him.

"A riddle." Harry concluded, hoping to sound smug like he always ended up feeling in Dumbledore's office when he finally understood the point the man was leading up to. The sphinx didn't move in answer, simply sat, almost completely still, staring at his face.

Harry let himself divert his eyes as he wished.

"It includes multiple of those, depending on what you chose." The

creature replied.

"Great. Bugger-all." Harry said as sarcastically as he could. "Here I've spent all bloody bleeding day tired and err...unhappy and shite and now I gotta think about dumb words and foolish rhymes and hell?" Harry spat on the ground, purposely keeping too much saliva in his mouth and letting it drip onto his chin.

"Okay, so tell me a damn riddle." Harry said, rolling back and forth on his feet and flicking his tongue out to catch the lost saliva before rolling his tongue thickly around his mouth, feeling the whole time like an eleven year old pretending to be tough.

That was disgusting.

"If you look you cannot see it but when you're looking at it you cannot see anything else. What am I describing?" The sphinx asked immediately.

Okay, shit, no idea. Harry thought, knowing he'd been foolish. He should have acted more ridiculously before. More idiotic? Like what, randomly yelling and shouting about? Harry wondered, before pulling his thoughts back to the riddle.

Okay so there's a difference between 'look' and 'look at'. So whatever it is is invisible? Maybe if you're facing toward it you are blinded, though you never see it in itself. Harry considered. Is this a magical thing I don't even know about?

"Is it magic?" Harry asked, only then wondering if he were even aloud to ask questions.

"I do not disrespect you, two-legged." The sphinx answered, looking almost affronted.

Was asking aggressive somehow? Harry asked himself, then

seriously wishing he'd at least spoken to Lance before he'd come out.

Or was that some sort of insult, telling me having to answer that would make it stupidly easy.

So maybe whether or not its magic makes its answer clearer? Harry pondered, before realizing that he was getting off track.

"How much time do I have to answer?" Harry asked.

"Why do you ask questions to which only you know the answer?" The sphinx replied.

Right, I have as much time as I have to spend here, and he wouldn't know that. Harry thought, thinking the creature's answer was rudely aggressive.

Charlie said they have a different way about them, Harry reminded himself, before tearing his thoughts back to the riddle.

I have all day then, Harry decided, mentally canceling his chess game with Ron and sitting down in the cool grass, his arms draped over his knees and closing his eyes, feeling his magic center inside him as he concentrated.

The silence was broken every now and then, by the thestrals pawing nervously at the ground and growling out to him, and the sounds of birds as they chirped and flew around the air. It got colder, and Harry warmed the air around himself without barely taking a thought from the puzzle in his mind.

"Eyelids." Harry said aloud, opening his eyes as the thought came to him.

He watched in relief as the sphinx tilted his head and nodded slowly.

"You're a very literal man, Mr. Potter." The sphinx said slowly.

"Am I wrong?" Harry asked.

"No..." The sphinx said carefully. "You are correct, you simply think significantly differently than I do. It is interesting."

"Good, then, I'm glad to hear that. I would like you to teach me legilimency, if you would, sir." Harry said, standing up, glad he could drop his foolish act so quickly. It felt horrifyingly disrespectful that day, to Michael and to the sphinx in front of him.

"I would have you answer a riddle first." The sphinx declared.

"But I just answered one." Harry said, blinking.

"You requested that last." The sphinx replied, his face blank.

"Shite." Harry cursed quietly, rolling his head up to stare at the sky.

"You act a fool to earn a disrespectful riddle, but I'm afraid your trick has turned against you. I now find myself before a man who can drop his public self-respect at will for the sake of a mission, but will reclaim it as soon as possible. The man who pulls dignity around himself like a child with a blanket gets no more regard from me than the man who still carries the child's cloth itself." The sphinx declared.

Excellent. Harry thought sarcastically, nodding and wondering if he should even chance another riddle.

"And you will attack me if I get this next riddle wrong?" Harry asked.

"I can't see why I would but that's as possible as falsehood." The sphinx replied.



"Aka you could just be lying right now about that, and you're definitely going to attack me." Harry translated aloud, shaking his head back and forth.

"I shall do this. You did properly answer one riddle. You will have a riddle to answer. You may either refuse to answer it and I lie to you or not as I will, or you will take the riddle, and if you answer it correctly, everything I say to you will be as truthful as I can make it in my limited knowledge of the world. What is your better choice?"

Harry sat back down, thinking about simply walking away and disregarding the option immediately. Even the sphinx's false information on proper legilimency was better than no information. Still, his other option was to be lied to. He couldn't take the riddle, he wouldn't even know if the sphinx was lying about telling the truth after he answered it.

Hey, that's true. Harry thought after the realization, chuckling to himself.

"See, I have no motive to take the riddle, as I have no reason to think you're not lying to me about telling the truth after I answer it, assuming I could even answer it correctly." Harry replied, shaking his head.

"Well chosen." The sphinx replied, a toothy grin stretching across his face. "What would you like to learn about legilimency?"

"Wait," Harry said as he stood up. "Let me ask, was that just a riddle or an actual offer?"

The sphinx grinned further at his question.

"An offer." It answered determinedly, before settling back down and returning to its stone-like stillness.

And of course it could still be lying.

"Right, I'm an idiot." Harry replied, shaking his head.

"I don't precisely want to learn about legilimency, I want to learn legilimency." Harry said, stepping closer to the large creature.

"No you do not." The sphinx answered.

Err...

"You wish to know legilimency, for whatever motives you have, and I can and do respect that. But you may someday learn how foolish men sound when they say they'd like to learn it. That implies an enjoyment of the process. Something I doubt you even begin know about." The sphinx corrected.

Okay...yes, that's what I meant. God this creature is fucking frustrating.

"What is the process? How does one learn legilimency?" Harry asked.

"To learn how to take secrets from others, one must first give up all of one's own." The sphinx replied. "And therein is the reason why I would teach you, and why one must first gain respect from my pack-kind before we start a wizard on the magic. I do not covet the secrets of a fool, but I believe I covet yours."

"How must I give up all of my own?" Harry asked nervously. ]

"I must go into your mind to teach you how to go into another's, Mr. Potter. Legilimency is the art of reading the magic of another's life. Much as one feels the formation of a spell within the magic of it one finds the formation of a life within the thoughts it has had, and as there is magic in that life, so there is in those thoughts. Legilimency is

the purest form of the magical detection spells you would have learned in wizarding schooling." The sphinx taught.

Is he teaching me truth or not?, Harry wondered, guessing the sphinx was smart enough to have made the whole monologue up if he'd wished to.

"If you wish me to teach you, then I will enter your mind and show you the images the magic in thoughts bring. It is up to you to train yourself in magical detection, as only with that will you progress to ever feel a thought without me."

"I already know some magical detection." Harry replied cautiously.

"That is irrelevant." The sphinx replied, looking rather confused for a moment.

"Alright." Harry answered, though he wasn't sure how much more there was to learn in magical detection, or how to go about researching it. He'd run out of books that didn't just tell him what he'd already learned on his own.

"Are you willing to learn legilimency?" The sphinx asked then.

"Yes." Harry replied, keeping his voice strong even as he felt a flicker of fear start in his stomach.

How much is this going to hurt?

~~HP~~

Sorry mates for the late update, academic life went boom. Thanks for the patience, especially given that I left y'all on a bit of a cliffhanger. In any case, here's the next chapter, and thanks so much for reviewing. Keeps me loving doing this.

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~~HP~~

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Something tickled in his brain, like a memory he couldn't quite remember, and then he was remembering everything.

He was in his cupboard, huddling by the light creeping in through the crack so he could crayon drawings on the floor. He was crying, and Uncle Vernon was yelling, and turning blue in the face, and he wanted it to be better. He was gardening, but the weeds wouldn't come up and all he could do was rip the leaves off the roots and hope Aunt Petunia didn't notice, though he knew she would. The mailman had come, and asked why he was sweeping the porch when he was supposed to be in school, and he answered that he'd gotten in trouble so he was supposed to clean the house, and then he saw Petunia glaring dangerously at him out of the kitchen window, waiting until the mailman went away so she could scream and yell and throw him in the cupboard again and he was going to be hungry.

He was a wizard! He could use magic and he was excited and hugging his letter to his chest after he got back to the Dursleys and he hadn't felt excited for so long it made him feel like he had a whole bucket of candies just for himself. He was meeting a boy on his own on a magic train, a boy who said 'wicked' and seemed to like him, and Dudley wasn't there to ruin it at all, and then he did have candies, and he shared them, and the boy seemed to like him even more. He could fly, he was on a broom and he could fly. He went to sleep in a bed, though it was too soft and made his back hurt, and he put on

robes, his new clothing, and went to classes with all the supplies he needed and he could learn and laugh and chose not to do the work at all and just stay up, laughing and healthy and amazing.

He was holding onto Quirrell's face and it burned, collapsing into itself in places, the skin melting over his fingers or chipping off, and the man screamed but he had to keep on, had to hold on because he didn't want to die anymore, he wanted to live, to see Ron and Hermione and fly his broom again like nothing had ever happened at all. He went outside to fly on his broom and for once the smell of burnt flesh left his nose, and the wind was in his hair, and he thought he could be okay again. He could always be okay again.

Tom Riddle's memory was handsome and human.

He was threatening Sirius with a wand, but then memories swarmed of Sirius's face, laughing and smiling and ragged, and Sirius had a place to live and Sirius knew his father, and his father was dangling a boy by his feet and choking him and threatening to humiliate him further and take off his pants and show his body to the world and that was wrong, that was sick and cruel and familiar because Dudley had done that to him, had hung him upside-down like a pinata and used him as such.

And Cedric. Cedric dead. Snape threw a jar at him and Sirius fell through the veil and Cedric was just dead and Jugson was lying at the thestral's feet, his body crumpled and successfully lifeless, and Harry was never going to regret that.

Henti was standing there in front of him again, in front of her burning house with her curly hair and tiny trembling hands cradling a My-Little-Pony and her mother screaming and screaming and silencing with a choke.

The My-Little-Pony was cute, was cute and small and covered in dirt in his hands, and he brushed it off but it was still stained and he left it.

Somehow cleaning it would ruin it. He was holding it in his hands, the cool soft plastic feeling like nothing found in the magical world, nothing that was supposed to be affected by the magical world, and the whole town was ash, ash around his feet and in the air and in his nose and he wanted to puke at the smell and the memories and the screams.

And he was studying. Studying in the Dursleys despite the headache and the fatigue that made his eyes droop of their own accord, but he kept learning, kept concentrating like there was nothing else in the world, because if he didn't there would be nothing left at all.

Then he was kneeling, gasping in air in front of a pack of thestrals, his eyes bearing into the gaze of a dark-haired sphinx whose expression hadn't changed at all.

The sphinx said nothing, just sat and stared, its whole body to the tip of its tail still as stone and as expressionless.

That was miserable.

Harry pushed himself standing, refusing to throw up and concentrating on how the sphinx's magic had felt within his own, mixing into his, covering his 'core' and tickling at his mind.

I can learn this.

Harry felt his storming emotions settle down with that thought. He was in front of the Forbidden Forest, needing to learn Legilimency. That was all that was important. He already lived through the past, why should he want to cry for seeing it again?

"Did you see everything I saw?" Harry asked, almost flashing back to the moment in Snape's office when he'd asked the same, thinking foolishly that learning occlumency had pried unbearably far into his privacy.

"I am a sphinx." said the sphinx.

Helpful.

"I am a human." Harry replied, wondering if he was going to make a fool of himself by trying to speak the creature's language.

"Good point." Rashemon replied, flashing a full grin of teeth. "I saw more. A wizard legilimens would see flashes of scenes, or even scenes in their entirety, I see what connects them."

"And what's that?" Harry asked, tilting his head to the side as he tried to figure it out on his own.

"You." The sphinx replied.

"You saw me? What does that mean?" Harry asked, feeling fear flicker through him again.

How big of a mistake have I made here?

"Do you know who you are, Mr. Potter?" The sphinx asked, sounding amused.

I know who I have to be. Am I that person? Is that even what the sphinx is asking?

"Why do you ask?" Harry stalled.

"Because it does not matter." The sphinx replied.

Harry blinked.

"Now you've totally lost me." He admitted, feeling foolish and annoyed.

"It does not matter to me if you know who you are or not, Mr. Potter, because I do." The sphinx said.

"So who am I?" Harry asked, instantly surprised by the second grin that sparked across the sphinx's face.

"And so you learn the sphinx's riddle, never to be truly learned." Rashemon replied.

Great, back to the constant riddles.

"The which?" Harry asked, trying to sound patient and interested when he wanted to kick the thing.

"You have found the question both can ask, a sphinx can know and neither can answer." Rashemon said, sounding like he was explaining something, though Harry was convinced his 'answer' hadn't helped at all.

"What?" Harry asked, closing his eyes and feeling a headache start behind his forehead.

The sphinx sighed and shook his head, his thick mane shaking back and forth.

"I know who you are, Mr. Potter, and I can ask you for that answer, but neither of us can put it in words. It is a riddle which both can know and neither can answer, and as such it is known that such knowledge is of the divine and cannot be spoken because it must not be."

"It is true that you won't sell my secrets then?" Harry asked suspiciously.

"The price of falsehood has not fallen." Rashemon replied.



Right.

"What's the price of falsehood?"

"I am a sphinx." Rashemon repeated.

"Which means?"

The sphinx sighed, and flicked his tail lightly.

"You are very human." The sphinx said, sounding impatient.

"Not to mention just stupid. What are you saying?" Harry pleaded.

"Knowledge which cannot be told is holy. We will not share it. I cannot say what an experience was like for you well enough for another to truly know it, and I will not test a sphinx's riddle. I will not tell any of what I've learned of you. Only what I've learned from you."

"And what's that then?" Harry pressed.

"That the world and this magic war are uglier than I thought them." Rashemon said seriously.

"And that is all that you will say of this?"

"And again you ask for my answer to something which only you can decide."

Aka he could be lying now. I simply have to decide to trust his word or not to., Harry chastised himself.

"I'll trust you." Harry declared aloud.

"I know." Said the sphinx.

Splendid, Harry thought.

"I shall reenter your magic, and lead you through to learn Listening." The sphinx said suddenly, lying his large body down and curling his tail around by his feet.

"Listening?" Harry asked, keeping himself from stepping backward away from the mysterious creature.

"Our word for Legilimency. Magic is Truth, legilimency is listening to it and others, and occlumency is learning not to shout."

Okay that made no sense.

"I shall teach you all three, killer human." Ordered the sphinx.

"Alright." Harry nodded, hoping he'd finally finish his training to hide his mind and peer into others.

"Your professor Snape was correct to tell you that the mind is not a book to read, thoughts are not often etched on skulls, and you've chosen to learn this the hard way, as you refused the wizard manner. But enough talk, one does not learn with words." said the sphinx. "I will go into your mind, I will show you how the truth should feel, and you will feel it. When you can twist your truth around someone else's to feel the same as this, then you will have learned to twist your mind around another's, and you will see what lies on the outside of it."

Okay. That almost made sense

"Right." Harry said.

"Friday." Said the sphinx.

"Er- you lost me again." Harry said, furrowing his eyebrows as he tried to understand what significance the word could have in the

sphinx's twisted language.

"We shall continue this Friday." Rashemon explained.

I'm an idiot.

"Oh." Harry said, refusing to blush.

"Come back here this same time." He ordered.

"Okay." Harry agreed, still fighting off a blush.

The sphinx stayed perfectly still, only moving to blink as it stared at his face.

Am I just supposed to leave now? Harry wondered, thinking about turning around and just walking through the thestrals.

"Jordon Fiedsmen, Amber Fiel, Mason Harlock, Jason, Ruby, and Harold Crichton, Marian and Thomas Baldwin, and David and Ronald Goodkind are Death Eaters." Said the sphinx

"I'll remember." Harry promised.

The sphinx stood up slowly, and turned toward the forest without a word, his huge body pivoting sideways as it turned.

"So you are loyal to the Opposition." Harry said.

"Apparently" said the sphinx as it walked back into the forest.

Right, could still be lying, Harry thought, frustrated.

All these names could be lies, Harry realized, even as he made sure to remember them.

In seconds the sphinx had disappeared into the heavily shadowed forest.

The sun is going down, Harry noticed, turning his head to face the sunset resting over the quidditch pitch. It was beautiful, purple and light orange, and it made him want to cry.

Harry shook his head, forcing his eyes to stop shaming him and headed back toward the edge of the anti-apparation ward, refusing to over-think why even something beautiful could upset him now.

"Harry!" Ginny called as soon as Harry stepped back into the Weasley home. Harry looked over to where all of the Weasleys were gathered around the large kitchen table.

"Yeah?" Harry sighed, breathing in the warm smell of food.

"You missed dinner." Ginny said as he glanced hopefully toward the stove.

"There's more, there's more!" Mrs. Weasley said immediately, bustling up from her seat to approach the stove.

"I can get it Mrs. Weasley." Harry smiled, even as she started dishing him out a meal of chicken and mashed potatoes.

"Now none of that." Mrs. Weasley admonished, mock glaring at him and handing him a plate. Harry grinned and nodded, taking his plate to the table and sitting down with the family.

"What's going on?" Harry asked, glancing around at them, wondering why they were all silent.

"New article, what do you think?" Bill said, breaking the silence in a solidly cheerful voice as he shoved a newspaper across the table to him.

## Murderer Dubbed "Thestral Killer" Strikes Again

### Florian Fortescue and Married Couple are Victims

An Article by Rita Skeeter

Harry read the front and felt his breath catch. He forced himself to breathe and glanced up at Bill, who was looking at him expressionlessly.

"How were they killed?" Harry asked, turning to Mr. Weasley.

"Read on. It's haunting." Mr. Weasley replied, gripping Mrs. Weasley's hand.

"That's an understatement." George said quietly.

"Alright." Harry said, turning back to the article.

You-Know-Who is no longer the only one we have to fear at our doorsteps, writes Rita Skeeter, Special Correspondent. Recently under suspicion for Death Eater associations, Mr. and Mrs. Castlan were today found as victims, not of the massing Death Eater forces, but of the vicious and brutal murderer the public is now calling 'the Thestral Killer'. The family was found dead in their beds, having been seemingly killed in their homes, with their wards undisturbed. Wizarding officials are yet to determine how the feat was managed, as the wards were not broken and indicated that no one, and no magic, had ever entered the home.

This crime has been officially linked by the honorable Magical Law Enforcement Unit as part of the chain of killings that took Arsenius M. Jugson and Thorfinn Rowle earlier this month. John Cratchet from the M.L.E.U reports that a muggle pony doll was found at the crime scene, an exact copy of the one found in four other crime sites. . The

muggle pony doll has been identified by the Daily Prophet's sources as what is called a My-Little-Pony.

Florian Fortescue's home was found in the same condition, and the same My-Little-Pony doll was identified beside his body.

Neighbors throughout the area reporting seeing nothing of the murderer, but all admit to the presence a thestral landing in the area only minutes before the Castlan's family's time of death.

Whoever is sneaking into wizard's homes, is using the thestrals as a guide. Jamil Carson from the Department of Magical Creatures informs Daily Prophet sources that thestrals can find anything, anywhere, but will rarely carry wizard riders. Obviously, the Thestral Killer has found a way, and the question becomes, is anyone safe?

"She's kept her flare for the dramatic." Harry commented as he looked up.

"In this case, it's appropriate." Mr. Weasley replied, sighing.

They're not brutal, Harry wanted to scream. He did what was necessary; brutal wasn't necessary. He never would have done that. Harry forced his expression away from his thoughts, keeping his lips and face relaxed and casual. It felt almost impossible, when he had his thoughts screaming in his head, but he thought he managed it.

"Hows that?" Harry asked as he carefully refolded the newspaper.

"That poor couple." Ginny sniffed, shaking her head. "It's sick."

"Didn't you hear, they were alleged Death Eaters." Ron snorted.

"Alleged." Ginny emphasized.

"We know Fortescue was a Death Eater, as well as Thorfinn Rowle

and Arsenius Jugson. It doesn't seem random." Bill said, shaking his head.

What is he saying?

Harry looked up from his food and found Bill glancing past him to share a look with Charlie.

"The question is, do we think he's in the Order?" asked Mr. Weasley.

Harry felt his head jerk over to stare at the man.

"Why would we think that?" Harry asked, blinking dumbly.

"The Castlan family and Fortescue? We'd just found them. That's a hell of a coincidence." Bill answered, sounding casual.

Harry forced his face to stay expressionless, even as he felt his heartbeat pick up and flutter in his chest.

I fucked up, Harry thought.

"So in the Order or in connection with it," Harry agreed, nodding.

"You think someone's a rat?" Charlie asked, his eyebrows raised.

"That or simply saying too much," Bill responded. "This could be an Order member's wife, husband, child, friend. Anyone with a connection to any Order member, really."

"Not any Order member, Bill, any Order member that was at the battle." Mr. Weasley corrected.

"Order members trust each other. There was plenty of time after the battle and before the deaths for members to talk," Charlie said.

"Couldn't he have been in the battle?" Ron put in.

"What are you talking about?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"Well, you said more people bit it than normal. Maybe someone else was there, right?" Ron said, shrugging.

"You're right." Bill said, sounding surprised. "He doesn't have to be in the Order, he could have just been in that battle."

"On that vein, he could be a Death Eater." Charlie said quietly.

"Or an onlooker."

"How would he know to be there if he weren't in the Order?" Mrs. Weasley asked, setting the table silent for a moment.

"So in the Order, associated with the Order, or an onlooker or a Death Eater, or associated with the Death Eaters." Bill surmised.

"That's not as much information as I thought." Charlie sighed.

They're protecting me, Harry thought, looking back and forth between the older brothers. Bill knew. Harry had no doubt the oldest Weasley son had figured out what 'passing through wards' meant after that article had come out.

It'll change the way this war is fought, Harry remembered Bill saying.

"It's something," Mr. Weasley said firmly, pulling Harry from his thoughts.

"Not much," Bill shrugged.

"Something is better than nothing. We need to catch this man," Mr. Weasley said, getting up.



"Do we?" George said quietly.

"He's killing people who are are killing us," Fred said.

"He's breaking the law," Mr. Weasley replied.

"And? This is war," George shrugged.

"And we are fighting to protect the law. He is no friend to us." Mr. Weasley professed, before heading toward the sink with his plate.

"The Order's breaking the law too," Ron argued.

"That's different," Mr. Weasley said, letting his plate clatter into the sink.

"It's still killing people," George said quietly.

"Dad-" Fred started.

"Let's not discuss this now. It's time to clean up," Bill interrupted.

"Yeah," Charlie agreed, standing up with his own dishes.

"Thank you." Harry muttered as he walked past Bill with his hurriedly-finished plate, magically cleaning it before he put it in the sink to be scrubbed by the already-moving sponges.

Charlie clapped a hand over Harry's shoulder briefly as the family finished cleaning up and started to scatter.

"I think I'd like to talk to you for a minute, Harry," Charlie said quietly, gesturing upstairs.

"I've gotta-" Harry started, looking to where Ron was setting up a

chessboard in the living room.

"I'm sorry, it's bad timing, Harry," Charlie said.

Harry glanced at Charlie and cursed to himself.

"Ron-" Harry called, catching the boy's attention. Ron looked up, his eyes darting back and forth from him and Charlie before he sighed and pulled his arm across the board, knocking the pieces over to skitter over the tabletop.

"I'll get to it." Harry promised, wincing.

"Of course, you do everything, don't you?" Ron sighed, fiddling frustratedly with the white knight before sneering at it and tossing it toward Harry as he walked toward the back porch.

Harry pulled his wand into his hand, summoning the piece into his fist before it hit the ground, grimacing again as the back door swung slowly shut behind his friend.

"Well that was dramatic." George commented from behind them.

"Ickle Ronnikins has a good sense of flare, we've never doubted that." Fred put in, walking into the room and flopping onto the couch.

"It's gotta be his greatest attribute." George agreed, sitting beside him.

"Which really isn't saying much." Fred mock-wincing.

"The white knight though, what symbolism!" George declared, punching his fist up in the air.

"Shut up guys." Harry sighed, shaking his head.

George winced, looking at him regretfully.

"This isn't the first time he's been suddenly and horridly angry with you, Harry." George said.

"Yeah but this time he's got a good reason for it." Harry replied, running a hand through his hair.

"No, this time you think he has a good reason for it. There's a bit of a difference there." Fred disagreed.

"Not all that much of one." Charlie said.

Harry watched as the two twins processed that, each glancing up at the ceiling out of the corner of their eyes.

"Hmm." George grunted pensively.

"Yeah." Fred said. "Go figure."

"Harry?" Charlie called quietly. Harry looked over and nodded, before following him from the room.

Charlie led him into his and Bill's shared bedroom, sitting himself down on the edge of one bed and gesturing for Harry to take a place on the other. Harry sat and leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees as he waited for Charlie to start, a single eyebrow raised in question.

To his surprise, Charlie blew out a heavy breath and nervously drew a hand through his hair before shaking his head and facing Harry.

"Shit." Charlie muttered.

"Just say it." Harry prompted quietly, keeping his gaze strong on Charlie's face as he tried to read it.

"Here's what I see, okay?" Charlie started, staring at his hands where they were linked between his knees.

"Someone invisible was at that battle. I saw too many people die, seemingly on their own while Moody was away from all of us. I know no one else in the Order kills, and I'm fairly certain no one had a good shot at some of the people I saw go down. Bill used to talk about your learning and your abilities all the damn time. Then I saw him go out with you and he wouldn't say anything. He just looked haunted, and was quiet all day, and when I heard you go out that night he told me not to mention it, serious as hell. I know you had too much splattered blood on you after that battle for having just healed us all and that you never bothered cleaning it off. I know you have more magic than you ever suggest, and that you don't even fear using it underage. It's like you know perfectly well the Ministry isn't going to catch you, or isn't going to care. I know that speech you gave made it sound like you knew damn well how this war was going, and that you were knee-deep in it. I know you looked damn scared while you were reading that article, and then your expression just melted away and you seemed perfectly nonchalant about it all, and I know Bill spent that entire conversation trying to get attention away from the information we gathered that whoever went after those three people was probably in the Order, and probably in that battle."

Harry forced his breathing to stay steady as he tried to absorb was Charlie was saying.

Am I caught? Harry thought, wondering what he'd do.

I was a fool about this again, Harry cursed himself.

"So what do you know?" Harry asked finally as the silence stretched out.

"I think you were at that battle, Harry. I think you knew that those

three people had to die." Charlie said, looking up and staring straight into his eyes.

Shit, Harry thought, letting his head face the floor as he thought desperately about how he wanted to take the conversation.

"You don't know all that much, to think that kind of thing." Harry said carefully, glancing up at Charlie through his hair.

"I've got a feeling about this one. You're not the Harry Potter you used to be." Charlie answered.

"And what does that mean?" Harry replied, feeling like he was walking on thin ice.

"You're not young, you're not impulsive, you have willpower enough to quite literally almost study yourself to death, you have the gaze of a hunting animal, and I know quite assuredly that I would never want to be on the wrong end of your wand." Charlie replied.

"Child soldiers aren't children for very long. Suddenly you're not a child anymore, and I'm thinking you're a soldier." Charlie said.

Soldier?, Harry thought, capturing the word as if it were the call of a savior.

"A 'soldier' did not kill those people." Harry admitted, his voice coming out rougher than he liked.

"I'm thinking one did." Charlie replied strongly. Harry glanced up and saw Charlie looking at him firmly.

Harry stayed silent, knowing he was convicting himself even as he didn't gasp and shout his innocence to the world. There didn't seem to be a point somehow, when Charlie was still looking at him respectfully and calling him a soldier.

"It wasn't brutal." Harry said finally, catching Charlie's gaze seriously.

"You do exactly what is necessary." Charlie said finally.

"Yes, I do." Harry replied.

Charlie sighed and ran his hand through his hair again.

"If there's anything you need-" Charlie started, before stopping and beginning to blanch. "I- I can't." He finished, running a hand over his face. "Shit." He muttered.

Harry nodded.

"Alright." Charlie said finally, getting to his feet and heading toward the door.

Harry nodded again, though Charlie's back was turned, and watched the man leave. He sighed to himself quietly, rubbing his hands together though they weren't cold and trying to figure out how he was supposed to feel and think. Charlie knew, and somehow agreed with him. That was all there was to it, so why did it feel like there was something cold leaking out of him and leaving him alone?

"Damn." Harry muttered, gripping the back of his head with his hands.

Harry walked into the living room and spotted Ron midway through a chess game with Ginny.

"Good move, I'm an idiot." Ginny was saying as Ron pulled one of Ginny's destroyed white pawns from the board.

The room got quieter as people slowly noticed he was there, Harry noticed, glancing around at the gathered family.

"I forfeit." Ginny said suddenly, carefully setting her king to the side even as she got up from the board.

"Right." Ron said, staring at Harry.

I feel like we're about to duel, Harry thought, watching as Ron scanned his eyes over him.

"A game?" Harry suggested, gesturing toward the board.

"Sure. You want white?" Ron said, sounding forcibly friendly.

"Sure. E4." Harry said as he walked over and began to sit down.

Ron moved his pawn in turn and they started moving through a French Defense.

The game went silently. Harry kept his moves controlled, carefully letting himself lose as Ron gained position and took his pawn. Ron stared at him through the entire game, only stopping for brief periods of examining the board. He didn't glare, or look expressionless, he just stared, as if Harry's nose was the most interesting piece of artwork he'd seen in a while and he wanted to spend an hour and a half just quietly taking it in. It was unlike Ron, to be quiet or pensive, and Harry quickly found it made him nervous. He felt as if he'd started playing a game with Ron and somehow his friend had been replaced by a completely different player and he wasn't sure when it had happened.

"We're not friends, are we?" Ron said suddenly as Harry tipped his king over in a sure loss. Harry glanced up, surprised, wishing the entire room hadn't suddenly decided to go quiet again.

"Ron, I've been busy as hell but-" Harry started, shaking his head.

"No. No." Ron interrupted quietly. "We're just...not friends." He said finally.

"Ron!" Mrs. Weasley admonished from her place on the couch.

Harry ignored her, watching Ron's face as the boy continued to stare at him.

"Do I feel like your friend?" Ron asked, perfectly seriously.

Harry felt his affirmation catch in his throat as soon as it started, and he let himself really think about the question. Did Ron feel like a friend?

Harry didn't answer, unable to openly deny the boy.

Ron let out a almost scared sounding chuckle and shook his head, his red hair falling back and forth over his face.

"No, mate. I don't feel like your friend." Ron said.

"Ron-" Harry started, only to cut himself off again. He had no idea what he was to say.

Think, then speak, Harry heard part of his brain repeat, only to then want to flip himself off.

"You don't feel like my friend." Ron said, waving his hand forward to gesture at Harry's body. "You're this guy I don't even know. Hell, I don't even know how to be around you." Ron said, scoffing. "I don't know if I even like you."

"I'm still Harry." Harry said, for all that meant. "I'm just not a fool anymore." He said.

"I liked the fool, you know that? I liked the randomly furious, heroic,



cool fool. This-" Ron waved his hand up and down Harry again, "This inferius that just studies and obeys and acts like he doesn't have blood and guts on his shirt? You don't even walk the same way." Ron said.

Harry felt his head droop and let himself stare at the chessboard where his king was knocked over, for some reason wishing he'd finished the whole game out.

"And you know what's really pissy about it? You didn't even do some awful bleedin' shit wrong. You just 'did what is necessary' or however you talk about it every time I ever ask you to do something with me. You didn't do anything wrong, you just disappeared behind something, and now I'm thinking you're not really going to come back out. You're just this now, and you know, I don't know 'this' and there's nothing I can fucking do about that, so how about we just accept that, yeah? 'Cause I'm bloody tired of being angry." Ron ranted.

Harry glanced up to see Ron looking steadily at him. Ron wasn't red or sweaty, or looking angry at all. He just looked resigned, and done. Harry nodded slowly, feeling there was something true in what Ron had said. Whatever in him that had been friends with Ron was gone, and Harry suspected Ron was right; it wasn't coming back.

"Okay." Harry said, nodding once and swallowing to keep his frown from showing too obviously. There was something awful in seeing Ron slowly get up from the chess table, and walk into the kitchen. He almost wished Ron had slammed the door. Somehow that would have felt hopeful.

Harry sighed and supported his head with a fist over his mouth, staring at the few scattered pieces on the chessboard.

"Harry, Ron has fits a lot-" George started.

"Not like this, we know that." Fred disagreed quietly.

"I'm going to go study." Harry announced as he stood up and headed out of the room, hoping Ron wouldn't still be in the kitchen. Ron wasn't, and Harry headed to the stairs, barely keeping himself from running.

Hi guys, please please review?

Harry threw himself into his studying as soon as he got into his room. He pulled open his books, spreading them across his bed in a semi-comprehensive list of wards and booby traps, and cleared his mind of everything but his occlumency and his magical awareness.

Salus alatus, Harry cast, raising an easy ward and studying its keyhole magic before collapsing the spell.

Silencium alatus, Harry cast, raising the similar silencing ward and setting himself to mastering keyhole magic until his five hours were up.

The five hours ended too quickly.

How did I lose Ron? Harry asked himself as soon as his alarm rang. He couldn't get the thought out of his mind. He'd been too busy to hang out with his friends, that was true, but they didn't feel so estranged from him as to be strangers. Ron did. Ron was gone, Harry had no doubt of that.

But why?

Somehow fighting the war was already making him into another person. It had only just started and yet he'd changed so much as to be a different boy from the one who befriended Ron on that train.

Harry sighed, stripping off his sweaty clothing and scurgifying himself clean, hissing at the familiar sting before he climbed into his pajama pants.

The bedroom door opened and Harry looked over worriedly, hoping Mrs. Weasley hadn't just walked in on him. He wasn't quite relieved to find Ron staring at him stiffly in the doorway, but he forced himself to relax.

"Hey mate." Harry said quietly, reaching for his nightshirt.

"G'night." Ron nodded at him, before rolling into bed and noxing out the light.

Right, Harry thought, sighing as he worked his way through the dark to his own bed and fell into it.

He woke, as always, at dawn, with Ron still sleeping beside him. Blessing his routine that let him get up, and get dressed without thinking, Harry got through his morning in a good mood and slipped outside to start on his daily exercise before the family woke.

He started with his running practice on the hill, slowly adding jumps and rolls into his sprint, pretending he was avoiding attack and casting spells to push him higher, raise transfigured wards around himself and block anything that was coming. He stopped exactly an hour later, slowing down and stretching until he felt ready to sneak back inside and shower.

He was back downstairs, showered and dressed in clean robes by the time Mrs. Weasley had started making breakfast. He set the table and silently helped her cook, yawning and staying quiet as if he'd only just rolled out of bed. Charlie was the next to come downstairs and say good morning, and silently joined Harry at getting cut fruit and yogurt on the table. Ron came down last in the family and took his place at the breakfast table and Harry acknowledged quietly that losing Ron didn't have to hurt as much as he'd expected, as long as he kept to his routine. Routine continued, and life went on, and Harry was good at working to forget he had something to mourn.

"Mail." Charlie announced as everyone got up from breakfast, walking over to the owls lined up at the window.

Harry ignored that part of the routine as always, bringing the table's

plates up to the sink by hand and barely glancing at the pile of envelopes Charlie carried over to the countertop.

"Dad, Dad, Bill, Bill, Bill." Charlie sorted, throwing the envelopes into piles. "Harry." Charlie called, reaching to hand Harry two letters.

One of the letters looked very official, closed with a large maroon seal that Harry recognized from the doors to Gringotts. The other was almost silly-looking in its muggle-ness. Harry was mostly sure the envelope was in fact a piece of printer paper folded over itself and taped roughly together, and was half-covered in stamps. A thick, childish script made out the address to HaRRY POTTER AT MAGIC SCHOOL OF WIZARDS. An official-looking stamp covered part of the address, saying Differed to Owl Office: Diagon Alley, London.

Excuse me." Harry apologized to the table as he carefully unfolded the official-looking letter and began to read.

Dear Mr. Potter

It comes to our concern at the Gringotts Wizarding Bank that your vault # 687 has exceeded third-level security vault capacity. The overflowing deposits have been placed in a temporary vault, and to be emptied or transferred to a new vault at your convenience. You have been billed for the temporary vault in the amount below. Included is a statement of recent deposits dating back to December 1st, 1996.

Thank you for your business,

Sincerely

Craknor

Department of Vault Overflow

Owl Office: Not Applicable

Floo Office: Not Applicable

London Desk: Third chair right of the fountain.

Deposits? Harry wondered, blinking rapidly in his suprise as he scanned the rest of the sheet. He'd been billed 5 galleons for the temporary vault, which he didn't mind at all, but he hadn't deposited anything since the first time he'd learned to the vault.

Harry pulled the attached paper to the front to read the small list of deposits.

60 Milliliters Doxycide and Spray Container –January 2nd

10 grams Flesh Eating Slug Repellent –January 2nd

13 wands and a list of their specifics –January 3rd

50 milliliters Befuddling Draught Antidote –January 3rd

200 milliliters Deflating Draught –January 3rd

250 milliliters Privacium –January 4th

500 milliliters Blood Replenishing Potion –January 4th

200 grams Bruise Balm –January 4th

200 grams Burn-Healing Paste –January 4th

200 milliliters Calming Draught –January 4th

50 milliliters Draught Of Living Death –January 4th

800 milliliters Exploding Fluid –January 4th

900 milliliters Catalyst Fluid –January 4th

One slip of paper –January 4th

Why would I need 60 milliliters Doxycide? Harry wondered, scanning the list again. He didn't even know what 'Privacium' was, nor why he would want 250 milliliters of it. Harry was pretty sure whoever had donated '10 grams Flesh Eating Slug Repellent' to his cause was insane, but for all he knew, the repellent was desperately needed.

I have to figure out how we're gunna win this war, Harry thought, staring out of the window after he'd finished eating. He was ridding the world of a few Death Eaters at a time, but he had no illusions that that was good enough. There were thousands of Death Eaters scattered throughout the Ministry, in the Order and everywhere. Most of them didn't have marks, and all he had left was a few sure Death Eaters like the Malfoys and a few unconfirmed names the sphinx had rattled off.

I have no idea how to use these supplies, Harry realized, scanning the list again. He was sure 'Exploding Fluid' would be good in a fight, but what fight? He didn't have any idea where the Death Eaters were striking yet.

And he'd only been given one name, if that slip of paper did in fact hold a name.

It's only been two days, Harry reminded himself, hardly able to believe so little time had passed. Surely he would get more people to join the war? But if they did, what would he do with them? He didn't know of any battles for his people to join.

I can't give them to Dumbledore, Harry decided firmly, feeling his jaw tighten. Dumbledore trusted too easily; there were spies in the Order,

and if too many of his people were killed for trusting Harry Potter with their names, no one would follow their example. At that point it wouldn't matter how many carefully written speeches he gave.

So what am I going to do with them? Harry wondered, feeling a thousand times the fool. Apparently, 'think, then speak' applied to giving speeches too. He was a fool and he'd asked people to entrust their lives to him, to join a war he didn't know how to fight.

What the hell do I know about fighting a Dark Lord?, Harry thought desperately, feeling his stomach clench in fear. Now if he fucked up, it wasn't just Ron and Hermione who would be in danger with him. Sirius had died because of his idiocy, and he'd promised not to do that again, but what the hell did that promise mean if he didn't know what he was supposed to do? He had to act, had to fight the Dark Lord, and he couldn't do it alone but that didn't mean he knew how to get or use help. All he knew was that someone had to stand up, and that was all he'd really said in his speech. He'd never said he knew what to do.

I'll go to Gringott's today and see what that slip of paper is. Then I'll panic. Harry decided, getting up from the table with renewed determination.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Weasley, I have to go." Harry said, carrying his plate to the sink.

"Where are you going? It's only 9:00." Mrs. Weasley asked, turning around in her seat to face him.

"Gringotts. It opened at five so I'll be fine." Harry answered, smiling reassuringly at her before walking toward the living room floo.

"Be safe!" She called.

"I will." Harry promised, taking a small handful of the floo powder on



the mantel, reminding himself to buy the family more of it while he was out. He was almost certainly using it more than they.

Harry walked into Gringotts, looking for a fountain in the crowded hall. Finally he spotted a small statue on the desks lining the hall.

"Excuse me, Mr. Craknor?" Harry asked to the goblin sitting beside the small fountain.

"Over there." The goblin said, pointing two chairs away.

Third chair right of the fountain, duh. Harry remembered, feeling foolish as he moved over to the other goblin.

"Mr. Craknor, sir?" Harry called, getting a tired stare from the goblin.

"My name is Harry Potter, my vault has apparently overflowed and I'm looking to access it and perhaps open a second security vault." Harry explained quickly.

"To access your vault see the accession desk across the hall. This department only handles overflow fees and vault openings." The goblin sneered.

"I'd like to do that then." Harry said, trying not to sound impatient.

"What security level would you like your second vault to be?" The goblin asked, dipping his pen lightly in ink.

Why would it matter if Gringotts has never been stolen from, except its highest security vaults? Harry wondered before making a quick decision.

"The same as my other vault. Third level security." He said.

"Very well." The goblin said slowly, marking something down on a

long list in front of him. "You will be billed 15 extra galleons a month. Would you like to make manual payments or have it pulled directly from your vault?" He asked without looking up.

"Directly, please." Harry decided immediately, seeing no reason to handle it manually.

"Very well." The goblin said, before returning his pen to its pot and reading over the list before taking a key out of a drawer and pushing it across the desk.

Harry took the key and waited a full minute in silence before he spoke.

"Is there anything else you need to know?" Harry asked, trying to be polite even as he stared at the unhelpful goblin.

"No." The goblin said tonelessly.

"So, this is done?" Harry asked, half-turning as if to leave.

"So it would seem." The goblin answered without looking up.

"Lovely." Harry said cheerfully, barely keeping himself from scoffing and rolling his eyes at the creature.

He was starting to think non-humans were universally annoying to converse with.

Harry went over to the 'accession desk' and queued up behind other wizards, fiddling with the vault key in his pocket.

"Name?" The goblin requested without looking up as soon as it was his turn.

"Harry Potter. I'd like to access my vault please." Harry said, putting

his key onto the desk.

"Very well." The goblin said, just as tonelessly as the other. "Crankbait!" He called.

Harry grinned at seeing the familiar goblin as he followed him toward the cart entrance.

"Hey, Crankbait. Good to see you again." Harry said as he clambered into the Gringotts cart.

"Indeed." Said the goblin, nodding firmly at him as he pushed on the lever that sent them hurtling downward.

Harry stayed silent the rest of the trip, feeling with his magic at the wards surrounding him, only able to find the keyholes of the ones that covered the entire bank, for he went hurtling past the rest of the wards too quickly. Still, Harry thought with a surprised blink, in theory he could walk through all of them.

Harry felt his resolve strengthen to master the technique as he thought of yet another way it could be helpful. He almost laughed aloud at the thought that one day he'd become a bankrobber to finance a war. He certainly hadn't thought of that option when he was a child at the Dursleys, dreaming of a better way to spend his life than housework and gardening.

Harry felt the cart finally slow and pulled a hand over his hand to settle it as he wordlessly handed his vault key to Crankbait.

That's definitely overflowing, Harry thought as his vault opened and all he could see were boxes upon boxes filling it to the top.

"These weren't in my deposit list," Harry said aloud, gesturing to the boxes.

"We listed what was inside the boxes, sir," Crankbait said.

"You opened them?" Harry asked, surprised and a bit off-put by the idea.

"The contents were listed on the boxes deposit notice, sir." The goblin replied, again sounding like the question hadn't been stupid at all. Somehow that always made Harry feel worse.

Harry wanted to hide his face in his palm.

Am I ever going to ask something intelligent to the creature? Harry wondered, shaking his head.

"Thanks" Harry said, grabbing a slip of paper off of the pile of galleons beneath the boxes, hoping it was the paper the deposit list mentioned. He kept it folded over and hid it in his pocket as he thanked the Crankbait and let the goblin close up his vault.

He waited until he was back in the relative privacy and noise of the Leaky Caldron before he took the note out again, wandlessly raising privacy and protective wards around himself as he finally got to unfold the note.

DERICK HOSKINS

A brave man, Harry thought, staring at the name.

How am I going to approach him?

Harry sighed, wishing it wasn't his problem and knowing he couldn't just wish the war away.

I'll figure it out as I go, Harry promised himself, burning up the note in his fist and letting the ashes fall to the table before he banished them to the fireplace.

He took out his second letter finally, ripping the tape open and unfolding the lined piece of yellow notebook paper within.

Dear Harry, Things have been very fucked up sense you left. I think we might need your help, Cause Dad said your freakishness can control people and I think you were doing that before and now we need it again. Everyone's starting to ask question and I think Mum hates that more than anything else. Come soon

Dudley S. Dursley

The signature was signed with more loops than letters, and Harry suspected that Dudley wasn't quite sure what a signature was, beyond the fact that it was illegible. He couldn't be amused though; the letter haunted him.

I need to get to Privet Drive, Harry thought, fingering the letter. He had to figure out what to do with the potions supplies, meet Derrick Hoskins and figure out what to do with him, but Harry had a feeling Dudley needed him to get to Privet Drive first.

~~HP~~

Privet Drive looked perfect. It's yard was perfectly cut, and perfectly green, as always, lined with its square-pruned hedges and the freshly swept, uncracked driveway leading up to the porch. Harry sighed at the determinedly boring-looking home and started up the front path, wishing Vernon's car was not in the driveway.

Harry knocked, throwing away the thought that he didn't have time for the muggles and telling himself that his old family would always be his responsibility, whether or not he wanted it.

If I do anything else, I'm acting like them, Harry thought, running a

hand through his hair and trying to ignore the stress that stretched through his body as soon as he saw the familiar house.

He spotted Petunia stretching her long neck to see him through the kitchen window and wanted to roll his eyes when he saw her whiten with horror.

"Vernon! Vernon, it's him! He's here! The freak!" Harry heard shrieked from inside.

Harry waited, wondering if he could justify just leaving as minutes stretched on. He knocked again, waited, and kicked at the cement porch landing until finally he heard footsteps behind the door and a click of the lock being turned.

The door opened an inch and Harry saw Petunia with her face against the opening, glancing around him.

Looking for any snooping neighbors, Harry guessed, waiting until she finally opened the door wider.

"Quick, get inside, get inside!" She hissed. "Move it!"

Harry stepped inside and moved out of the way for her to shut the front door, waiting for the yelling that would inevitably start as soon as the door was closed.

"Hello, Aunt Petunia." Harry said politely just before the door snapped closed.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING HERE? YOU SAID WE'D BE RID OF YOU!" She screamed immediately.

Petunia yelled as always but she wasn't looking at him, Harry noted, staring at her in confusion. The woman was glancing around inside the home as if she were still searching for neighbors.

"HOW COULD YOU COME HERE? YOU ARE NOT WELCOME!" She yelled, now facing almost fully around to stare at the staircase heading upstairs. Harry heard thundering footsteps come from above and watched out of the corner of his eye as Petunia whitened and backed up. Vernon appeared at the top of the steps and immediately went purple.

"YOU!" He shouted.

"Hello, Uncle Vernon. How are you doing today?" Harry asked politely.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING HERE?" Vernon shouted, spittle flying from his mouth before he turned to Petunia, his face darkening even further. "Why did you let him in here?" He hissed. Petunia's eyes widened and started jerking back and forth between Harry and Vernon.

"No, no, see, the neighbors, what would they think, I had to let him in to-" Petunia started.

"YOU HAD TO? HAD TO? What does he control you now?" Vernon snarled.

Oh my god, Harry thought, watching Vernon turn on the woman. This looked...usual.

"No, I just thought, we, you, we-" Petunia sputtered.

"SPEAK, woman, what do you think I have all day to just stand here?" Vernon spat.

"We wouldn't want the neighbors to see the freak, would we?" Petunia asked. Vernon sneered at her and turned his glare to Harry. Harry didn't think he'd ever been so glad to see someone decide to

glare at him.

"So, boy? Get out." Vernon ordered simply.

"No." Harry replied.

Pain blistered across his face. Harry coughed out a breath, barely understanding what happened until he saw Vernon pulling his fist away. Harry tasted blood pooling in his mouth and spat it onto the clean, polished wood floor. He raised a hand to his face and wandlessly fixed the glasses crushed against his ear before he wandlessly healed himself.

Petunia was screaming by the time he was done.

"FREAK! GET OUT! GET OUT!" She yelled, pointing at his face.

"No, Aunt Petunia." Harry said, before reaching his hand forward toward Vernon.

Patricus totalus, Harry cast, before wandlessly catching Vernon's frozen body and lowering him to the floor.

"NO! VERNON! VERNON!" Petunia screamed, shaking her hands in front of her chest. "VERNON!"

"Hi, Harry."

The sudden quiet was striking, Harry thought, glancing over at Petunia to see her hyperventilating, and following her eyes to see where she was staring. He found Dudley standing on the top landing of the steps, looking down at them with wide eyes.

"Hi, Dudley." Harry said calmly.

"Did- did you-" Dudley started.



"He's alive, just quieted for a moment." Harry promised.

"Duddykins, sweetheart, what's going on, why are you talking to the freak?" Petunia asked quietly, her breath coming in heavy gulps.

"We need his help, mum." Dudley mumbled, kicking at the stair rail.

"We don't need anyone's help, sweetums." Petunia said before glaring heavily at Harry. "And especially not his. Don't you know that Diddykins? He's a freak, baby, nobody needs him." Petunia cooed softly without looking away from Harry's face, almost smirking.

"I just- I think we kinda do a little." Dudley muttered.

"No, we don't." Petunia snarled before turning on Harry. "Get out." She said, glancing pointedly at Vernon's still body.

Harry rose a silencing ward around them wandlessly, before turning to face Petunia fully.

"He can't hear us now, Aunt Petunia." He said worriedly.

"And why would I care about that?" Petunia asked, pursing her lips tightly.

"Harry, I think we sorta care about that." Dudley said.

Petunia pursed her lips at her son, but said nothing.

"Let's go into the parlor." Harry said finally, feeling the silence stretch out.

"You certainly won't. It's my parlor and I say there's no place for you in this house." Petunia ordered, glaring fully at Harry.

"I say I'm going into your parlor now, and you can follow or not." Harry replied, before walking toward the room.

"I'll call the police!" Petunia shouted.

"You could do that." Harry called back, sitting down in one of the room's ugly armchairs.

"Why couldn't I?" Petunia screeched from the other house. "What have you done with my house!"

"Nothing, Petunia. It's only that I'm a minor under your guardianship and the school dorms are closed at the moment, meaning that if the police were to come, they'd only be able to insist that you house and care for me here." Harry said, grinning as the realization came to him. He'd only been thinking she was never going to call because of what the neighbors would think, seeing a police car outside her home.

"You're not thinking of staying here?" Petunia asked, peeking her head into the room and sounding almost panicked.

"No." Harry assured her quickly, glancing at where he could see Vernon's fat feet petrified just outside the parlor.

"Good." Petunia nodded quickly.

"Dudley!" Harry called, realizing the boy hadn't thought to follow him. He heard Dudley lumbering down the stairs and finally saw the boy in the doorway.

"Yeah?" Dudley asked.

"Come sit with me." Harry ordered.

"What's going on?" Dudley asked as he wandered over.

"That's what I need to ask you. Sit down?." Harry replied, feeling strange ordering the boy but doing his best to hide it.

Dudley sat down on the couch and immediately started staring at his feet.

He really doesn't want to talk about that letter, Harry thought, looking around the room for something to change the topic for awhile.

"Hey, you're a lot skinnier." Harry realized aloud, only to think he'd sounded horrible. "You look great." He tried to smile.

It was mostly true though, Dudley did look to have lost twenty pounds at least. It only made him into more of a cylinder than the sphere he'd been approaching, but it looked healthier.

Dudley smiled a little, the expression pushing apart his cheeks in a way Harry was sure he'd never seen. The boy had always cried, pouted, simpered, or jeered. He'd never just smiled.

It looked good, but strangely, it still didn't look happy. The smile didn't reach his eyes. The boy just stared, his eyes worried and dodgy, looking completely unaware that being more attractive was supposed to make him happier.

"Things aren't good here, are they?" Harry said, deciding to cut straight to the chase. Dudley shook his head quickly, his eyes darting from Harry's face back to the floor.

"Does this shouting happen a lot?" He asked, feeling stupid as soon as he said it. Of course it happened a lot, he'd just seen that Vernon's anger hadn't gone anywhere since he'd left.

"Are things worse since I left?" Harry asked, feeling a weight drop into his stomach as he spoke the words. He didn't want to know the answer, didn't want to know that people had suffered because he

hadn't been there to-

Dudley nodded. Harry clamped his teeth down, swallowing the heavy news.

"Alright. Does Vernon ever get more mad than we just saw him?" Harry asked, feeling his breath catch as he asked it. They'd been awful to him, starved and screamed at him, but they'd never been physical. Surely-

Dudley stared up at the ceiling, rolling his tongue around in his mouth before he shook his head.

"Has he ever hit anything, a wall or the couch or whatever?" Harry asked again. Dudley blinked up at him in confusion for a minute, before jerking his head over to a badly-plastered over spot in the wallpaper.

"He punched through that. Mum started complaining about the neighbors and he hasn't done it again." Dudley muttered.

"Don't you ever worry that he's going to hit you or Aunt Petunia?"

"Sometimes." Dudley muttered. "But he only ever hit the wall, and he really mad a lot about it hurting afterward so I don't think he's going to do it again."

Harry believed him, and breathed again.

"Okay." Harry said. "But I want to make sure, because he's not treating you right."

"He's treated you." Dudley muttered.

-like this, Harry completed.

"And you said that it wasn't okay, didn't you?" Harry said, remembering their strange summer.

"Yeah." Dudley muttered. "But that was different."

"It's not different. And you knew that when you sent that letter." Harry declared firmly, feeling like he was comforting a child though he was staring at his huge cousin.

"You're gone, why is he still so damn angry?" Dudley snarled before seeming to melt back into himself, looking back toward the ground and drawing his fat knees together.

"I think got into a habit of it." Harry answered honestly, shaking his head.

"That's weird." Dudley muttered.

"You were in the habit of it too." Harry pointed out. "What was the point of punching kids in the park except that that was what you'd always done when you were bored?"

Harry watched as Dudley blushed and glared at the carpet.

"Alright. So remember when I wrote my godfather every week and you all had to treat me nice?" Harry asked, getting an idea.

"Yeah, Dad let you go to that sport thingy. He even yelled at me when I asked to go with you."

"Write me a letter every week. I might write back, but if not, keep sending them, even if it's just a line that everything's okay. If you don't write, or send that there's a problem, I'll come and make sure Vernon doesn't hurt anyone here anymore. Okay?"

Harry watched as Dudley processed that.

"I'm not very good at writing." He said finally.

"You don't have to write much."

"I don't know how to send them."

"Write Owl Office: Diagon Alley: London, on it."

"Okay." Dudley said.

"Repeat it."

"The address?"

"Yeah."

"Owl Office: Dragon Alley: London."

"Diagon Alley." Harry pronounced slowly, before accioing the dust in the air and transfiguring a pen and paper from it. He wrote down the address and handed it to the stunned-looking boy.

"Woah." Dudley said.

"Write to me, and tell me if everything's okay. If Vernon starts to shout, or hits anyone at all, you must tell me." Harry ordered.

"He wouldn't." Dudley said, almost whining, shaking his head.

"You'll write me." Harry ordered, staring into the boy's bewildered eyes.

"Okay." Dudley said.

Harry stood up finally, and walked over to Vernon, wandlessly setting

him back on his feet before he unpetrified him and lowered the silencing wards.

Vernon started to sputter immediately. Harry wandlessly cast the man mute before he could start to shout.

"Listen to me very carefully, Uncle Vernon. Last time I was here, my fire trick was fake. My magic isn't fake anymore." Harry said slowly, like he was talking to a foreigner.

Something impressive, Harry thought, before grinning suddenly and bringing his hands up to his sides.

Silencium alatus, Harry cast, barely needing to concentrate to cast the spell and start the casting image. Magical smoke started blooming from the floor and billowing up the walls, changing from gray to white and swirling with colorfully wrought, flying dragons that breathed bright red smoke into the rest.

He could hear Petunia start screaming immediately, and cast a silencing spell around the house. He really didn't want the police to arrive after all.

"VERNON!" Harry heard and ignored the call. Vernon was starting to change from his angry red to a sick-looking gray. That wasn't good enough. Harry wanted him terrified. Harry found himself grinning at the change of emotion, feeling anger slowly seep through him at the horrid man. Petunia was awful, but Vernon had screamed at his wife.

Aula ignis, Harry cast, feeling the magic of the simple privacy spell even as he watched Vernon's face pale further. All Vernon would see was the wall of heatless fire that leaped up in front of the smoke.

What makes fear? Harry wondered, searching through the spells he knew.

He cast a cauterwauling charm he'd learned in one of his early books on charms, letting a cat-like scream strike across the house and watched Vernon flinch and start to breath forcibly.

Other's fear, Harry answered himself, watching Vernon whitening.

What scares me about Voldemort? Harry wondered, staring at Vernon.

What he's willing to do, Harry decided almost immediately, smiling slightly to himself. He was willing to do so much more than the ugly man.

Accio, Harry cast, pointing his hand at the kitchen behind Vernon and carefully calling a knife to fly right past him into his hand. He cut the knife down his hand and drew the blood into the air.

Mutare, Harry cast, transfiguring the knife and blood into a form of a snake. Harry quick spun the life-less form's head around, breaking its dead neck and holding the limp body up and letting the image melt over his hand and through his fingers before he threw the very-real, very thick blood to splash onto Vernon's feet.

God damn abusive man, Harry thought angrily, burning the desecrated body up in a fireball above his hand, silently apologizing even to the life-less form as he turned it to ash in his hand. He froze the shape of the flames into a hovering ball of ice and let it fall to smash to shards on the wood floor.

I'm definitely not Ron's old friend, Harry thought, thinking over the display he'd just created. Still, it was necessary, and he didn't need to be Ron's friend, and he certainly couldn't be the young boy he'd been when he'd run around with the redhead having 'adventures'.

Harry released all of his spells, wandlessly cleaning the blood and ice from the floor and Vernon's feet and letting the entire house drop



into silence.

He let that silence stay, seeing Petunia collapsed against the steps and Vernon staring at him speechlessly. He felt like he was conducting a haunted house, but by Vernon's white expression, he hadn't gone too far.

"Do you get the point?" Harry hissed, keeping his face expressionless as he smelt urine in the air. "Dudley will write me a letter every week, telling me whether or not things are well. I will receive the letters every week, I will read them, and I will know if he is lying. You may not scream, you may not curse, you may not hit anyone in this house. You may make as many holes in the walls as you want, but most of all, Uncle Vernon, you will do everything you can possibly think of that will mean I never have to come back here, because if you're anything more than a lump of abusive fat, you will fear me." Harry ordered, sneering.

"Yes." Vernon answered, nodding quickly and barely breathing as he glanced at Petunia out of the corner of his eye.

"Good." Harry replied, returning to his stoic expression.

Oh shit.

"Dudley," Harry called, turning toward the living room.

Dudley was half-fallen on the side of the couch, staring at him in terror.

Damn it, Harry thought, seeing all trace of friendliness gone from the horrified face.

"Yeah?" Dudley stuttered.

"Good luck." Harry said, before raising a wandless silencing ward.

"Mention carrots in one of your letters if your father is forcing you to lie, and something is really wrong." Harry said.

"I like carrots." Dudley responded, barely moving at all.

"Just if something is wrong." Harry reminded him, before lowering the silencing spell. He wanted to leave the house and never look at Vernon again. Somehow the fact that Vernon had turned his anger against his own family made it all seem worse. Harry was used to his childhood, he'd been able to take it. Dudley was only just learning to be nice. Harry wanted to hurt the man but left it at the meaningless spells. He never wanted to be able to hurt someone and enjoy it.

Harry had barely gotten out of the house before he noticed a bright-silver form of a dog running at the house.

A Patronus! Harry recognized, running toward the magic that the house's wards had kept it from entering.

"There's a Death Eater raid rumored to hit Berryington sometime today. Get there." The Patronus shouted with Moody's voice as soon as Harry managed to touch it.

Not a dog, a hyena, Harry thought as the spell flashed away.

Shit, Harry thought, starting to gather his concentration to apparate. He didn't know Berryington. He needed the thestrals.

Hoskins first? He asked himself, as he apparated away.

..

~~HP~~

He ran to the thestrals, using all of his trained muscles to throw his body forward until he again saw Mrrowerl already running toward him. He slowed the animal, promising himself he'd learn how to mount and ride some day, and clambered up as quickly as he could.

"Derrick Hoskins!" Harry gasped, hoping the man wasn't in a public area. It would not help anything to have the thestral seen, and what if someone recognized him with it? The Skeeter article flashed in his head and he asked Mrrowerl to drop him off away from people, if it were possible. He concentrated and charmed himself invisible, depending on his practice to keep up the charm even as he fought to stay amount the thestral.

And now I hope to hell and back that he can understand me as well as I think, Harry thought, holding onto the thin animal's back with all of his muscles as it started pounding down the field. He desperately needed to learn to ride.

Before I get killed on these things, Harry thought.

I'll get Hagrid's help. He decided as his heart jumped into his throat with the thestral's takeoff.

To Harry's relief Mrrowerl began landing in an empty-looking field beside a single remarkably muggle-looking farmhouse.

As soon as the thestral had stopped, standing foreleg-deep in mud, Harry was off his back and running through the field to the house.

The house was made of brick and stone, with a chipping terracotta roof that seemed to be slowly sinking off. The green-painted door hung on an angle, making the whole house look like it was leaning

slightly to the right.

Harry stopped at the edge of the house, surprised at the advanced protective wards covering every inch of the house and yard. He scanned the magic quickly and wondered if he'd ever be able to break through if he didn't know how to pass through ward keyholes. He doubted it. The magic was strong.

So what? Do I shout for him to come out? Harry wondered, trying to peer through the windows of the house before he realized that three of the privacy spells were blocking his sight from anything within. The table and lamp he could see in one of the windows likely didn't even exist.

I don't have time for this, Harry thought, turning his head around to call for Mrrowerl. He saw something moving on the path toward him and focused, only to see a man walking up with a paper bag supported on his hip.

Harry began rising more protective wards around himself, quickly building shields around himself and booby traps around the yard even as he caught his breath. By the time the man had made it up the path, Harry was prepared to survive an ambush.

Harry let the man pass him before he spoke, though his body was vibrating with tension. He had to get to Merryington, and he couldn't afford to waste anymore time. People could already be dying because he wasn't there to fight.

"Mr. Hoskins?" Harry called, stepping behind him and releasing his invisibility charms, unsurprised to see a wand already up pointed at his face by the time he registered the man's turning. Harry checked his magical shields, ensuring himself that he had everything he needed to block whatever spell the man sent at him, with exception to the Unforgivables, and those he had time and space to dodge. Sure that he was still safe, Harry didn't move out of the way of the

wand.

"Are you willing to fight?" Harry asked, half-holding his breath to keep from gasping in air from the sprint and deciding not to waste any time with pleasantries.

"Mr. Potter." The man said instead, holstering his wand at his hip. "And yes, I believe I am."

"Do you know where Merryington is?" Harry asked, hoping not to show the man the thestral.

"I do." The man nodded, putting down his bag onto the floor. Harry glanced into it and saw a beautifully carved ceramic lamp and what looked like a muggle coffee-maker, and quickly decided not to ask.

"I don't. Let's apparate.." Harry said, reaching his hand forward and canceling some of his physical wards to let the man take it, careful to leave himself enough distance to still dodge an unforgivable if he needed to, and hoping the man was not about to apparate him to the Dark Lord.

I'm trusting this guy a lot, Harry thought, as the stranger clasped his hand.

But if I don't trust him, why should he trust me?, Harry decided, nodding to the man and feeling the magic tug at his gut as they started to apparate away.

He landed to see a shop-front explode outward toward him. He threw up a shield to contain the flying glass and metal and reached his hand out to push 'Derrick Hoskins' down as he transfigured a tilted wall in front of them and spun around to see if there were any Death Eaters at his back. .

Immediately he felt Derrick casting a shield that blocked a hex

headed toward them. Harry searched to his right where the magic had come from and saw a Death Eater rushing into a shop ahead of them.

God I hate wands, Harry thought, wishing he could switch to wandless without giving away that secret

Expulso, Harry cast, holding out his wand toward the shopfront and carefully blowing it out.

Evanescio, He cast desperately at the dust that was left behind. He needed to see, needed to know if there was anyone in that building but the Death Eater. Harry got a quick clear glance into the building and was sure he'd only seen the one man.

Expulso, Harry cast, targeting the entire building and watching it explode upwards in a storm of dust.

Done, Harry thought, immediately having to duck a hex aimed at his head.

He turned in time to see Derrick sending a killing spell at a Death Eater. The Death Eater's robes ripped open as guts were cut out of him, and Harry watched the Death Eater's dying eyes widen with pain.

"Agh." Harry heard Derrick choke and turned to see the man unhexed, but staring into space and gasping.

Aguamenti, Harry cast, splashing clean water into the man's face and shouting.

"We don't have time for your shock, stand up! You're doing well!" Harry yelled in the man's face as he bodily dragged him standing.

"I've never fought before!" The man gasped, shaking his head back

and forth.

"You just did, you saved my life!" Harry lied, shaking the man once before he had to release him to block another spell headed at them.

He's loyal though, Harry thought with relief, hating the idea of killing the young stranger now fighting beside him.

I need to know where we are, Harry decided.

"Defend my back." Harry ordered, reaching up to the top of the wall and pulling himself up.

I'm carrying two wands from now on, Harry decided unable to use his left hand at all.

They were in a muggle shopping center's parking lot, Harry recognized, glancing around at the strip of clothing stores around them. They were protected on the one side by his wall and a tipped-over jeep to their left in front of the McDonalds he'd just destroyed.

Where is everyone? Harry wondered, glancing around at the dust covered homes and quickly killing a Death Eater he saw running up the street.

"Why is nothing happening?" Derrick asked quickly.

"Shh!" Harry ordered, listening carefully.

He heard a hum coming from up the street where the Death Eater had been heading.

"We're too far south. Let's go." Harry ordered, jumping down from the wall and running toward the fallen Death Eater.

He grabbed the wand behind the corpse and cast a quick hex at the ground with it to make sure it matched him. The concrete cracked loudly and split with the cutting hex and Harry nodded, glancing back to make sure Derrick was with him before he ran up the street.

It would take too much of his concentration to be invisible this time, Harry knew, wishing regretfully that he had his cloak as he ran into the muggle street. It was lined with two story houses and shops, and he was only hoping he was fast enough with his magic to survive an ambush. He didn't think there was much else he could do about it.

"Hoskins, I'll guard left, you guard right, let's move right up the middle of this street. Open areas aren't always safer but I'll bet we'll kill more Death Eaters that way." Harry decided aloud.

"Yes, sir." Harry heard Derrick call from behind him.

Sir? I'm sixteen, Harry thought, almost chuckling at the title before he focused back on the task at hand.

Harry ran easily, jumping over parts of broken homes and occasional corpses as he made his way up toward the buzzing screams.

"KILL THEM!" He heard Moody roar as he reached a street corner.

"Looks like you brought us pretty close to the action. We're lucky." Harry whispered to the panting Derrick behind him. "After this, start running every day until you can run ten miles without trouble. Looks like you need to be in better shape." Harry suggested, seeing Derrick struggling to catch his breath and wondering if he should wait to let the man rest before they joined the fray.

Derrick nodded tiredly.

"Moody!" Harry heard a woman scream.



"Alright, looks like time for resting's up. Let's go." Harry decided aloud, quickly turning the corner, already casting a shield for the hex heading toward them. To his surprise he almost bumped straight into a Death Eater just in front of him, already casting the same shield.

Petrificus Internus, Harry cast. The corpse in front of him fell over and Harry found himself staring at a red bolt headed toward his chest.

Shit! Harry thought, desperately raising the shield again and feeling the hex sink harmlessly against his magic.

That was stupid of me, Harry chastised himself. He should have waited until the enemy had taken the spell.

"Harry, get out of here!" Lupin's voice shouted. Harry looked up to see Lupin staring at him up the street.

"LUPIN, DUCK!" Harry shouted.

Lupin, you're too easily distracted, Harry thought as he sprinted toward the man, barely making it in time to grab Lupin's arm and pull him over out of the way of a killing curse.

"GOD DAMNIT REMUS!" Harry shouted in the man's face before he spun to kill the man who was likely aiming at them again.

To his surprise, he found himself staring at Bellatrix as she danced over a corpse, grinning brilliantly.

"Oh he's come to play, Ickle Little Harry Potter. Hello, Harry Potter." She called.

Harry froze, scenes of Sirius's death flashing through his mind.

Do I have enough hate to crucio her? Harry wondered, feeling a snarl

at his lips. Unforgivables are all about intention...

It only took him a second to realize he had to dodge the Unforgivable Bellatrix was aiming at him, and a second after that to realize he had locked his knees, he was in no balance to jump out of the way, and that he was too slow.

I'm lucky Bellatrix likes torture, Harry thought.

And then he started to scream.

Pain, like nothing he remembered.

And he would do anything to have it stop.

And it did, and he was rolling out of the way, and getting to his feet. He threw his emotions away, not having the time to scream and cry and roll into a ball to never speak again. He needed to fight, Bellatrix was in front of him, fighting off Tonks with a simple flick of her wand.

Tonks will lose, Harry thought, throwing a desperate spell at Bellatrix, hoping just to distract her. Bellatrix blocked it easily and turned on him.

"Aw, Harry's back on his angel feet. You're the Golden Boy, aren't you Harry? So can you take the shot?" Bellatrix grinned, throwing her arms wide to leave her chest open to attack.

Patricus-

"DIE!" Tonks shouted, shooting a hex at the witch.

No, damn it! Harry thought as he lost his chance, as Bellatrix turned back to Tonks.

"No, no, rude little girl. Won't you let your Golden Boy try? Or do you

just agree that he'll fail?" Bellatrix sneered at Tonks, easily blocking Tonk's stupifying hex and sending one back. Harry shot out a shield and stopped the hex just before it hit Tonk's chest, a full second before Tonks raised it herself.

"I'll kill you, Bellatrix!" Harry shouted. "You killed Sirius!"

Pay attention to me!, Harry thought desperately, running toward her.

Harry threw a hex at her with his left hand, shielding himself from the hexes around him with his right.

A hex came at him from behind, and Harry spun, ducking under Bellatrix's crucio to send a curse at whoever was behind him. In a second he saw Derrick spinning out of the way of his curse.

Hoskins attacked me?, Harry wondered, before he saw the Death Eater robed corpse crumpled at the man's feet.

Harry spun back, raising a shield to block Bellatrix's hexes and sending back three hexes in a row before he ran and slid behind a car.

"Hide and seek, hide and seek, little Harry!" Bellatrix cooed. Harry listened to her walking.

I need to distract her, Harry thought, just before he heard something explode with an expulso spell. Harry smelled the dust and burning and jumped up from behind the car, to see the bombed cobblestone street falling back to earth, surrounding a witch still clawing at her eyes.

Dust, Harry recognized, before pointing his wand.

Patrificus internus, He cast, and Bellatrix stopped. Her body fell slowly, and Harry found himself waiting for the thump of her body

hitting the ground. It never came, drowned out by the din of Order members and Death Eaters flinging spells back and forth, shouting orders at each other and exploding the muggle lot around them.

"Harry!" Harry heard and turned to see Charlie behind him. "There's a rush two blocks down, we're getting polarized."

"Shit!" Harry cursed, turning and following the man at a run.

"HOSKINS, TONKS!" Harry shouted as he saw the two together. "FOLLOW US!"

They gathered and moved forward quickly, fighting the few Death Eaters they saw appear from the shops and debris around them and not even checking to see if their hexes landed.

They ran quickly, seeing more and more muggles running in a panic away from them, carrying children and bags and sprinting down the streets. Harry saw the street in front of them grenade upward and the dust and debris, not stopping as he led his group to the side of the street, killing a Death Eater he saw behind a glass storefront without pausing. He pushed back into the center of the street as soon as he could, clearing the dust from the air and raising a protective wall behind them as he scanned the street, trying to make sense of it.

The street was slowly polarizing, that was true. The Death Eaters were falling back against the line of homes, clearly counting on the Order members not to risk the muggles by blowing up the buildings.

Most of them have left though, Harry thought calculatingly.

He saw a Death Eater pull a potion vial out of his pocket, and made his decision.

EVANESCO, Harry cast, pointing his right wand at the homes and

blowing the front of them out at the Death Eaters.

The Death Eater with the vial half-turned before a glass shard entered the side of his head. Harry started blasting spells into the mix of debris and wounded or startled Death Eaters, levelling the group as quickly as he could, feeling Charlie's and Derrick's killing spells flying alongside his own.

They stopped to see the last of the Order stunning the few Death Eaters they could find scattered across the street. Harry watched as Order members pulled off the Death Eater masks, calling out names or snapping pictures of each.

They must have a list, Harry thought hopefully, memorizing the names and faces as they were revealed.

"Apparate out the injured!" Mr. Weasley was shouting.

"Already done!" Tonks called back.

"The aurors will be here soon, we've gotta get out of here!" Called a witch Harry didn't recognize.

Oh yeah, this is illegal, Harry remembered.

But would the Ministry actually bother arresting us, not the Death Eaters at our feet? Harry wondered, doubting it.

"So, we're done?" Derrick asked from behind him.

"Looks like." Harry sighed, turning back to him. He put a hand on the exhausted man's shoulder. "You did well."

"I'd never killed a man." Derrick said.

"It gets..." Harry thought, looking up at the sky quickly. "Simpler."

"Good." Derrick said, breathing heavily.

"Shit." Charlie cursed. Harry looked over, to see Charlie's arm bathed in blood, dripping quickly onto the broken pavement. He barely managed to catch the man before he collapsed at his feet.

"A MEDIC!" Harry yelled, kneeling down to heal Charlie as best he could.

"Cauterize it!" Moody said quickly, running over.

"Hold him." Harry ordered, pointing his wand.

Charlie woke screaming immediately, but Tonks and Derrick had him firmly spelled down, and the wound was closed.

"Looks like I'm not getting out of this un-scarred." Charlie said, gasping.

"No one will. " Moody snarled, tossing a potion into Charlie's lap.

"But how the hell did I not notice this one?" Charlie asked before swallowing the potion quickly.

"Shock and adrenaline." Harry answered, remembering his training sessions when he'd sometimes end with broken bones he hadn't noticed getting.

"Let's move out." Moody ordered, limping away.

"Mr. Potter?" Derrick asked, glancing at Moody.

"Yeah, we're moving out. Go home, get cleaned up, I'll find a way to call you for the next round." Harry answered.

"Hey, that's brings up an interesting point, how'd you find me first the first round?" Derrick asked him. Harry practically felt Charlie's gaze land on him.

"That's not important, and I can't tell you anyway. Let's go home." Harry replied.

"Yes, sir." Derrick answered, before apparating out.

I'm sixteen, Harry answered silently, shaking his head at the formal man.

Harry waited until everyone but Moody was gone before he left, spending his time scanning the area with his eyes and magic, trying to ensure that the battle really was over.

"Well fought." Moody gruffed.

Harry looked over at him, feeling shocked, and nodded at the man.

"Thank you." He said simply.

"You're welcome. Next time don't let your man get sliced." Moody replied.

"Yes, sir." Harry replied simply, before apparating to the Weasleys for their last night before they returned to school.

Harry arrived with a crack, to see Mrs. Weasley rushing through the orchard toward him.

"Oh, Harry!" She cried, pulling him into his arms.

"Are you okay? What's happened?" Harry asked desperately, feeling his heart beat double in his chest as he searched the area over the mother's shoulder.

"You!" She said, pushing him away with her hands on his cheeks. "It'll be alright, Harry. We've all been there, we can manage it together." She said.

"Mrs. Weasley, you are worrying me, what happened?" Harry asked.

"That's what I was going to ask you." She blinked, looking confused and worried for him. "Tonks told me you were at the battle," She said, as if speaking to a child.

"I was," Harry said.

She thinks I should be in shock, Harry realized, almost smiling.

"I'm okay, Mrs. Weasley." Harry promised.

"Of course you are, but just remember we're here for you okay?" She said caringly.

"Okay," Harry promised again, looking over her shoulder to see the Order members gathering.

"I have to go discuss our success." Harry said, pulling from her hug with a reassuring smile and walking forward toward the group.

"We need to lesson our setting impact." An Order member Harry didn't recognize was saying. "Who can say how many muggle homes we just destroyed."

"You're an idiot." Moody said immediately, looking almost stunned by the man.

"Mad-Eye!" A different Order member chastized.

"He's right, we should care about our lives and taking theirs." Harry



said, glancing over at the other man apologetically.

"And who is hell is this asshole?" The man snorted.

"Harry Potter." Harry said.

"Holy hell." The man said, shaking his head. "I think you're an ass."

Harry barked a laugh, liking the man.

"I might be. You're still wrong. We should care about battle, not muggle's front porches."

"Don't put that in your speeches." Moody barked, grinning and touching his wand to the tip of his cigar to light it.

"Wasn't planning on it." Harry said, grinning back.

"Excuse me, but it wasn't idiocy. Those are the people we are trying to protect." The man scoffed.

"But at this point we can't be doing that by protecting their homes. We don't have the people for that yet. We barely have enough men to protect ourselves and fight at the same time, from as far as I can see." Harry said.

"What, from your one, glorious battle?" The man sneered.

"Respect Harry, Joss, you're being an ass." Tonks chastised.

"No, we both are." Harry corrected. "But I'm at least right."

"Bullshit." The man replied. "And I'm Joss." He introduced, stretching out his hand.

Why the hell do I like this man? Harry wondered, before throwing the

thought away as irrelevant.

"Harry." Harry replied simply, walking over to shake it.

"Joss is right, Harry. You just joined this, don't be telling us how to fight until you've seen more." Mr. Weasley said quietly.

"He's better than any of you." Moody scoffed, pointing his cigar around the gathered group. "He at least can kill people."

Harry closed his eyes, hearing the collective shock. He opened them to see Tonks looking at him with pity.

"I saw it, Harry, you took down Bellatrix." She said carefully.

"Oh, Harry." Mr. Weasley called pityingly.

"You took down the crazy bitch?" Joss asked, raising a thick eyebrow at him.

"I did." Harry replied.

"Nice." He said.

"Thanks."

"Harry, you killed today?" Mr. Weasley asked softly.

"I did." Harry answered, watching the man's wrinkles deepen with worry. "I'm okay, Mr. Weasley, I've done it before."

"When?" Mr. Weasley gasped, looking only more concerned.

"Professor Quirrel." Harry answered, naming the only one he would admit too.

"You killed him?" Mr. Weasley asked, sounding surprised.

"Yes, didn't Dumbledore tell you?" Harry blinked, wondering if he'd just found the reason why no one had reacted to that.

"You killed a professor?" Joss asked, sounding almost impressed.

"I did." Harry replied, turning back to the man and wishing he wouldn't make the act sound so glorious.

"But how old were you?" He asked.

"Eleven." Harry said, refusing to wince as he admitted part of his childhood.

"Damn." The man whistled. "That must have been a shit day."

Or perhaps that impressed tone isn't what it seems, Harry thought, considering the man.

"It was." Harry admitted simply.

"Um, okay, so Charlie you took down the names?" Tonks asked suddenly.

"I did." Charlie replied, though his voice sounded strained. Harry glanced down at the man's arm, wincing in sympathy at the glistening straight burn.

"Alright, so how about we discuss any changes of tactics in the next meeting, let's go home?" She said, glancing around at the group.

Harry watched as they all grumbled and nodded, and slowly started to apparate off on their own.

Well that was...leaderless, Harry thought, watching Tonks smile

happily at Remus and apparate away.

"Harry, you should not have gone to that." Remus said, reaching his arm out to cup Harry's shoulder.

"Yes, I could have been hurt." Harry agreed distractedly, watching Molly Weasley greet Charlie and Mr. Weasley, relief written through her features.

"Harry, I'm serious." Remus said.

"Yes, Remus, but it's time you learn that so am I." Harry said, getting annoyed and allowing himself to show it as he turned to meet Lupin's gaze fully. "I just went through a battle, get off my back about whether it was wise or not until you learn whether or not I was competent in it." Harry snarled, thinking of the moment Remus had allowed himself to be distracted and almost get hexed.

I got distracted too, Harry thought ashamedly, remembering Bellatrix's torture.

I killed Bellatrix, Harry remembered.

"Excuse me." Harry ordered, walking away. He suddenly wanted to be alone to think.

Harry went upstairs and heard someone already in the shower.

Charlie, Harry guessed, knowing Mr. and Mrs. Weasley had a bathroom of their own.

Shit, Harry thought, folding himself down to wait on the floor across from the bathroom door.

I killed Bellatrix, Harry repeated to himself, remembering the image of the woman's clawing just stopping, and her body collapsing into

the explosion mist. Bellatrix was supposed to be his great revenge, she'd killed Sirius and he would kill her and be -

Glorious? Harry caught himself, almost smiling. That was what was missing, there was supposed to be glory and vengeance in her death and she was just like all the others.

I wouldn't have wanted to enjoy her death anyway, Harry decided, lifting his head up to stare at the opposite wall. He never wanted to enjoy a death.

Not caring is one thing. Enjoyment's- Harry struggled with his thoughts, trying to find an appropriately revolting word.

He gave up when Charlie pushed open the bathroom door, already fully dressed.

"Hey Harry." Charlie said, scraping a hand through his wet hair.

"Hey." Harry answered, pushing himself standing.

"You really killed Bellatrix today?" Charlie asked.

Harry sighed. "Yeah."

"Damn. You wanna talk about it?" He asked.

"No." Harry replied, shaking his head slightly.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Alright." Charlie agreed immediately, heading toward the stairs.

"Charlie!" Harry called, getting the boy to look back before he had a

foot on the steps. "It's because I don't need to. I'm alright." Harry promised.

Charlie bowed his head quickly.

"Alright." He said with a slight smile before heading up the stairs.

Harry headed into the shower, feeling calm and okay again. He wondered what Mrs. Weasley was cooking for dinner, and how much she'd let him do. She'd only just learned that he was capable of handling both chopping vegetables and occasionally stirring a pot the night before. Harry was wondering if she was learning that he knew how to cook, though he hadn't said anything about the skills he'd picked up growing up at the Dursleys. He enjoyed seeing her surprise at everything he did competently, and he didn't mind chopping vegetables; it kept his hands busy while he wasn't allowed anything more strenuous.

~~HP~~

The next morning Harry set the table while Charlie answered letters from his job. Mrs. Weasley made breakfast as always and Harry quietly enjoyed the calm that came with Madam Pomfrey's restrictions on his schedule. He was feeling stronger though, and his arms and spine were beginning to fill in with muscle so he had to accept that he wasn't going to be able to stay so uselessly relaxed for much longer.

"Harry, hand me that paper?" Charlie called as he finished his letters and set them aside.

Harry threw over the paper and curiously took the two letters Charlie handed him in return.

He opened the glaringly muggle one first, throwing the official Ministry envelope back on the table.

Hi Harry,

Things are better again, though really quiet. You woldn't believe how boring it is here. Dad won't take me to boxing at all and yesterday Mom said Im too fat for icecream. I went with my friends to shake hands with Mark Evans in the park and felt better but I'm bored again. I wish you were here to show youre magic again. I was sorta startled by it before but now I think it was awesome. Where did the magic dragons come from? Are they dangerous? See you, Dudley.

How many times can he fit 'again' in a letter?, Harry wondered, taking up the parchment and quill Charlie silently pushed across the table at him.

Dear Dudley,

Harry stared at the beginning of his letter, wondering how friendly he wanted to be with the teenage bully.

Sounds like no one else is talking to him, Harry noted, rereading the short letter.

Don't worry about anyone calling you fat; you're staring to look great.

What am I supposed to write about him beating up Mark Evans again? I thought that kid was like ten years old. It's not like I don't know what 'shaking hands' means, and am I supposed to be the one ignoring that now?

But if I chastise him he won't write me, Harry worried, biting on the end of the quill.

What do you mean you shook hands with Mark Evans? What does that mean?, Harry wrote, smiling slightly to himself as he faked the misunderstanding, hoping Dudley would be ashamed to explain.

If he just says it outright without shame he'll likely never stop bullying, Harry thought, wondering why the idea bothered him so much.

The dragons were just images. The affect is called a casting image and is used to show a wizard when a spell is created or razed, in the case that the wizard casting it can't detect it. Usually the preliminary casting images (casting images to show when a spell is started) are only used in elementary magic when the wizard using the spell is judged likely incapable of normal spell detection. But to answer your question more simply, no, they're not dangerous; they're not even real dragons.

Yours,

Harry.

Harry smiled, folding up the letter quickly and putting it in the growing pile of mail to be owled out.



He cut open the Ministry envelope with a quick slide of his wand and pulled out the thick paper, groaning to himself as he recognized the letter.

Dear Mr. Potter,

We have received intelligence that you performed the Petrifying Hex as well as the Winged Silence and Winged Security charms at forty-six minutes past seven last morning in a Muggle-inhabited home and in the presence of three Muggles.

The severity of this breach of the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery has resulted in your expulsion from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

As you have already received an official warning for a previous offense under section 13 of the International Confederation of Wizards' Statute of Secrecy, we regret to inform you that your presence is required at a disciplinary hearing at the Ministry of Magic at 9 A.M. on January 9th.. You are required to hand over your wand to Ministry Officials for proper destruction at that time.

Hoping you are well,

Yours sincerely,

Mafalda Hopkirk

Improper Use of Magic Office

Ministry of Magic.

I didn't consider the damn Ministry wards at the Dursleys. Damn it all! Damn powerplay, Harry cursed, Scrimgeour must have realized I'm better as a man under his control than as a simple mascot.

And how the hell am I going to stop him from doing that? Harry wondered, carefully folding the letter back into its envelope and staring at the Ministry seal.

"Oh, Harry, you're not going to like this." Charlie said ominously, handing Harry the paper.

More bad news? Harry thought, wanting to growl.

"Read the first page. It's from last week, we missed it 'cause of the battle." Charlie said.

Harry Potter stands up beside Scrimgeour!

This last Sunday, Harry Potter joined the Minister in welcoming us to a new, much bright-looking year. "I just wanted to show the world that we're united," said The-Boy-Who-Lived, standing proudly beside Minister Scrimgeour, hope clear in his bright eyes. "If we're united, nothing can break us," he added, before standing up in front of the large gathered crowd. "Scrimgeour and I have come together, to do our part, no matter how onerous, no matter how rough, and no matter how costly, because the cost of not fighting, of remaining separate and allowing the Death Eaters to consume our country from the inside, will be twice as onerous, twice as costly." He said, waving fervently to the assembly.

Harry looked up, seeing Rita Skeeter's name on the paper above the huge photo of him standing beside Scrimgeour as the Minister gave his 'speech'.

Harry smiled, nodding slowly to himself.

"Or you will find it awesome. Okay, what's up?" Charlie asked, blinking in surprise.

"How is the Daily Prophet affiliated with the Ministry?" Harry asked,

looking up.

"I don't know. Ask Dad," Charlie replied with a shrug. "I know it gets money from them, but I have no idea as to the terms of that."

"No, it's okay. Tell your mother I've gone to the bookstore, will you?" Harry asked, standing up.

"Harry-," Charlie stared, sounding nervous. "I can't be making alibis." He said regretfully.

"You aren't, I'll be at the bookstores on Knockturn and Diagon." Harry promised, walking toward the floo.

I forgot to get floo powder after the battle, Harry chastised himself, grabbing another handful of the powder.

"The Leaky Caldron," Harry ordered, stepping into the flame.

~~HP~~

Harry stood outside the phonebooth hours later as the sun began to set behind him, feeling the wards that hid the Ministry building just beyond him.

Let's see if this is possible, Harry thought, grinning and layering invisibility spells around himself as he walked forward, shifting his magical signature to walk through keyholes as he approached the magical building he couldn't see. Finally he made it through the last and the large white-washed building flashed into view in front of him. Harry startled, jerking back and pointing out both his wands before he realized what had happened and lowered his instinctive shielding wards.

Shit, Harry laughed to himself, quieting as he spotted a wizard walking toward the Ministry entrance. He rushed into step behind him

as quietly as he could, keeping his short distance until he made it through the sliding doors into the building.

Here's hoping I don't get caught, Harry thought, glancing around at the attentive-looking wizarding guards waiting just inside the Ministry doors. He wanted to impress with his magic, not get dragged out of the building by a security guard like a shoplifting child.

He made his way past the wand-registration desk and ministry fountain, dodging the crowd carefully to get to the Ministry department map and find the Minister of Magic's office on the first floor.

Thank god, Harry thought, remembering the trouble of being invisible on a crowded metro and not wanting to try the experiment again on a lift.

He followed signs toward the Minister's office and spotted it quickly. He busied himself shifting his spells as not to get caught by any of the invisibility charm detectors lining the office's entrance as he approached, and was able to simply keep walking and enter the office without trouble by the time he'd reached it.

The office opened into what looked like a comfortable living room, complete with a small library of books on wooden shelves and a warmly-burning fireplace on the side. Harry walked slowly past the room, through the doorway at the end of the room to the large office that opened beyond it.

Harry held his breath as he entered, seeing a witch busy painting her nails at the desk just inside from the door. Harry wandlessly silenced the floor beneath his feet, cursing himself for forgetting to do that before as he walked quicker past the woman and through the open door just beyond it. He walked into an even bigger office, and saw Scrimgeour busily writing something by hand just in front of him.

Harry turned and silenced the area around door and its hinges before he shut it and walked over to the chairs turned toward the Minister's desk, silencing the space around the chair before he sat himself down and comfortably clasped his hands on his lap, wandlessly releasing the silencing and invisibility spells.

And now I wait, Harry thought, looking around at the sparsely decorated office. A painting caught his eye and he nodded as he recognized it as Picasso's Guernica, and tried to remember what history he could about it. All he remembered was it was about a bombed town in Spain, and contented himself with just examining it. Somehow everything in the piece looked like pain and realization.

I'd like that painting too, Harry thought, before discarding the idea. He wouldn't waste any money if he could use it on the war someday. Suddenly he disliked Scrimgeour's having it, and turned back to the man and cleared his throat.

Scrimgeour looked up and jerked, clearly almost losing the pen in his hand.

"How-?" He gasped, glancing around at the door and window before blinking and calming his face back to a stony expression.

"Mr. Potter." He greeted.

"Mr. Scrimgeour." Harry replied, nodding respectfully.

"You don't have an appointment-" Scrimgeour started.

"That's interesting." Harry said, pulling the Daily Prophet front page out of his robe pocket. "I'd like to discuss this, if you'd be so kind." He said, placing the article on the desk.

"The Daily Prophet makes its own profit, it's not my concern and please-" Scrimgeour started again.

"Not true. The Daily Prophet is a Ministry-affiliated paper, according to contract 13092 on public record, Ministry Contracts volume 18." Harry interrupted again, shaking his head. "I have a copy of the contract here if you would like it." He said.

"Mr. Potter, what is the purpose of this?" Scrimgeour asked impatiently.

"As I was going to say, I would like to discuss the libel incurred upon me by this and previous Daily Prophet reports. I have been damagingly misrepresented in this and previous papers, and I am planning on filing a lawsuit against the Ministry directly, as it is liable under Ministry Law for all statements and materials published in its affiliated newspapers, newsletters, and other contracted published materials. In other words, Minister, you have control over this newspaper and you are expected to use it. And being as how I have pensieve-documentable memories of the statements I actually made in the interviews and speeches in question, and that I am Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived, I suspect I will be able to both win this lawsuit, and drag your public opinion through the mud, if I go through with it." Harry said, watching as Scrimgeour carefully pulled all expression away from his face.

"So you are threatening me, in other words?" Scrimgeour summed up.

"I'm informing you of a potential lawsuit, sir. This is considered at very least polite in politics." Harry replied.

"Excellent." Scrimgeour said, without a trace of sarcasm in his tone. Harry had to struggle not to grin at the quip.

"And somehow you think you will win some unreported amount of money through this lawsuit, despite the fact that you are sixteen years old and have never before been to court." Scrimgeour said.

He's just trying to intimidate me, Harry reminded himself, refusing to budge.

"Yes." Harry repeated.

"And somehow you don't realize that me allowing you to be pulled into a public hearing for the misuse of magic implies that I don't much care about destroying our public camaraderie. Which, I suspect, is the next thing you are going to fling onto my desk. You want me to allow you entrance into Hogwarts this coming year, and in exchange you plan on giving up this supposed law-suit, which you've undoubtedly just spent the last few hours researching." Scrimgeour said.

I hate politics, Harry thought, watching Scrimgeour brilliantly deduce what he was doing, and feeling more and more the fool for trying it.

Worse case I don't show up at the hearing, get declared an outlaw, and continue doing precisely what I'm already doing for the war. I'll have to withdraw all of my Gringotts money and not visit the Burrow, but beyond that I'd be fine, Harry thought, nodding his head.

"And you can refuse, guessing that I'll lose the case, or win and you just won't have to care about the terms all that much. The ministry has suit money to spare and as you said, you're dragging our camaraderie through the mud in the intention of controlling me already. Surely you are planning on winning this trial and making me do community service or some such for the kindness of allowing me to keep my wand, and then designing my community service to be more speeches and photos beside you." Harry guessed. "But see, you are not sure how much I'm actually in control of the war effort, how much me and my people are actually doing, and how much you'll be losing my losing both my support, and my freedom. See, if I make my speeches under Ministry control, then you're liable for them, aren't you? So I can't, for example, call people to become vigilantes,

can't call them to do anything productive at all really, and you might just lose the war for trying to control it. And remember, you lose the war before anyone else. The Ministry falls and we keep fighting, but I suspect you wouldn't be given the chance. You need the Ministry to stay functioning, and I'm thinking you know you need me and my people for that." Harry said, focusing hard on his Occlumency to ensure the Minister didn't try and surprise him to find out that 'his people' really was just one brave man named Derrick Hoskins, who'd been the only one to respond to his speech's publication at all.

I should write Gringott's for a weekly deposit report, Harry decided as he waited for Scrimgeour to consider his words.

"Alright, I'll do this, Mr. Potter. You'll be pardoned for your misuse of magic, and you'll let the lawsuit go, but keep in mind, your 'vigilante malitia' owes the Ministry a favor." Scrimgeour said, his eyes calculating.

"Just send me a owl." Harry agreed, reaching his hand over the desk. Scrimgeour shook it briefly, before shaking his head.

"How the hell did you get in here?" He asked.

"I flew of course." Harry replied, giving the answer Hagrid had told him in first year. "Good evening, Minister." He said, before walking out. He grinned at the shocked expression the assistant gave him as he left, and immediately reapplied his invisibility charms as soon as he left the office, reminding himself to buy floo powder before he went home to the Weasleys.

~~HP~~

By 7:00 that evening the small home had exploded into chaos. Harry stood by the stove, making dinner, as the Weasley siblings ran around in panic, gathering up books and belongings in a yelling fit.



"RON, GET YOUR CHESS SET OUT OF THE FAMILY ROOM! GINNY, DO YOU HAVE YOUR ROBES?!" Mrs. Weasley was screeching up the stairs as Harry finished the pasta and transfigured a strainer to pour it into as the meat sauce finished cooking.

"Oh Merlin, I haven't even started dinner!" Mrs. Weasley cried, rushing over.

"It's almost done, Mrs. Weasley." Harry said, putting the finished pasta back in its pot and beginning to grind pepper into the sauce pan.

"Oh you're a blessing, Harry," Mrs. Weasley gasped. "But you have to pack!" she realized, sounding panicked.

"It's done, Mrs. Weasley," Harry said, smiling at her scared tone.

"Oh, I don't know how you do it; you're twice as competent as my own children, and I've been trying to train them for years."

"I don't know, Mrs. Weasley."

Harry grinned, turning off the heat on the ancient gas stove Mr. Weasley had bought so Mrs. Weasley could teach the underage kids to cook.

"CHARLIE! GINNY! RON! DINNER!" Mrs. Weasley screamed toward the stairs.

"JUST A MINUTE MUM!" Ginny called down.

"NO! NOW! HARRY MADE IT!" She screamed back.

"It's alright, it'll stay hot." Harry said easily, moving forward to sit at the table.

"Oh you've even already set the table. You're an angel, Harry," Mrs. Weasley smiled.

"Yes, Ma'am," Harry joked, glad for the quiet moment.

"Well start eating, start eating. You certainly shouldn't wait until your food is cold." She ordered, shooing her hands at him.

"No, it's fine, Mrs. Weasley," Harry replied obediently, smiling at her.

"Are you okay Harry? I wanted to ask you that before but everyone was still running around." She said, sitting down beside him and taking his hand.

"I'm okay," Harry replied.

"Are you actually?" She asked, tightening her hand over his.

Harry stayed his quick answer and thought about it, considering his memories of Quirrel and Sirius and his destroying Dumbledore's office and that rage he'd always felt stirring. He could hardly remember what that felt now. He wasn't even suffering from Sirius.

"I'm not good, but I'm okay," Harry answered, smiling with the truthful thought even as he acknowledged that she wouldn't understand it. He murdered, and he had yet another blood-stained shirt shoved at the bottom of his trunk from the last battle; he wasn't precisely good anymore, but he was okay. And that sounded horrible, but he'd known from the moment he'd started thinking about the war that he wasn't going to be able to be Dumbledore's perfectly nice child hero to win it.

"Good." Mrs. Weasley said, reaching up to run her hand down his face affectionately and pat him once on his shoulder. It felt good, and Harry found himself leaning into the touch and smiling.

"We all love you Harry Potter, you know that, right? I know your life is getting harder, you're coming and going on Order business that I suspect even Dumbledore wouldn't tell us, but I've told this to all of my fighting sons and I'll tell it to you, while you're gone, remember: you'll always have family here," Mrs. Weasley said, flicking her finger up under his chin.

Harry grinned harder.

"Yes, Ma'am," He said.

"I'm never going to understand how Dumbledore justifies sending you out to battle at your age. I'm going to talk to him, you better believe that. Nor do I know how he managed to get the Minister to accept your underage magic. But there you were, pretending this whole break that you still had chop vegetables by hand to help me with dinner." Mrs. Weasley laughed, getting up from the table. "Well, regardless, you can drop the act young man, next time you come home. For the meantime, let's eat and get you all back to school,"

Harry smiled and nodded as footsteps began storming down the stairs.

~~HP~~

"Good evening, Mr. Potter. Try not to get too much ash on the carpet." Professor McGonagall greeted as Harry walked through the floo into the school.

"Evening, Professor." Harry replied.

"Oh, Mr. Potter-," she called from behind Harry as he reached the door. He turned back.

"If you are feeling..well, rough, about what happened the other day, do be sure to see me." She offered.

"What happened?" Harry asked blinking.

"Ms. Lestrangle's death, Mr. Potter." She clarified slowly.

Duh, everyone's talking about it, Harry thought, chastising himself as he glanced over his professor's concerned frown.

"Thank you but no, Professor. I am well." Harry said firmly.

"Good evening, professor," Harry repeated, turning to go.

"Good evening, Mr. Potter. My door is always open." McGonagall replied.

"Again, thank you." Harry said, nodding distractedly as he left.

He went straight to his dorm, planning on settling in to study his five hours that night before he remembered that he'd spent the morning studying the Diagon Alley's entire bookshelf on Ministry law.

Harry glanced out of the corridor windows and groaned. The sun was only just starting to sink over the snow-coated grounds. It was far too early for bed and he'd already done everything productive he was allowed for the day. Harry stopped, leaning out of the corridor window, watching Hagrid feeding Buckbeak in front of his cabin.

Harry grinned, getting an idea, and started jogging down the hall.

"Harry!" He heard as he passed Griffindor Tower. Harry recognized the voice and stopped immediately, turning with a smile making its way across his face easily. Hermione was running full-tilt down the corridor, a scarf waving behind her. She stopped a foot from him, already beaming.

"Hi, Hermione." Harry said.

"You look great!" She said, panting.

"Well, not dead anyway." Harry replied, glancing down at his much-thicker body.

"Mrs. Weasleys always good for fattening us up." She smiled.

"Indeed." Harry laughed.

"You laugh!" She said, pointing. "Oh, you look so much better, Harry, I'm so glad."

"You visited us at the Weasleys." Harry pointed out, tilting his head at her.

"Well, yes, but I rarely saw you you know. Ron was sorta-" She stopped, throwing her head back and forth as she searched for a word.

"He was." Harry replied quickly.

"I should probably tell you something." She said, biting her lip.

Harry felt her bubbly mood slowly die, and sighed.

More bad news, He thought, though he thought he could guess what she had to admit.

"Want to take a walk down toward Hagrid's?" Harry asked, naming his earlier destination.

"Let's." She said, straightening her fluffy hat.

Harry walked in silence with her, casting a heating spell around them as soon as they got outside and letting her lead him toward the lake

instead.

Hermione cast a silencing spell finally and Harry added his own, keeping his wand in his sleeve as he tried to hide his stronger magic from her.

"Ron and I are going out." She said when they reached the lake. Harry nodded, thinking he'd about guessed as much whenever he saw them together.

"He blushes when he look at you." Harry agreed.

"You already knew!" Hermione yelped, mock punching his arm.

"Not precisely, but it doesn't startle me either." Harry replied honestly, shrugging.

"You're a lot...calmer than you used to be." Hermione said.

"I am." Harry said simply, letting his mind glaze over memories of yelling and shouting, and that image of Jugson lying on the chill ground, too still to be alive.

"Harry, please don't hate me?" She asked, biting his lip.

Harry laughed, the sound dying in his throat as he remembered her asking the same thing, after threatening to report his training to Dumbledore.

She really would have helped me, doing that. Harry thought, remembering his weeks of teetering near death.

"I don't hate you." Harry said, amused again.

"But he's being obnoxious to you!" She yelled exasperatedly.

"No, he's not." Harry refused.

"Don't put this into blaming yourself, Harry-" Hermione started.

"No, I mean that quite seriously. He's not being obnoxious to me, or at least not anymore. A lot has happened in the last few days you may not understand."

"What wouldn't I understand?" She asked, sounding worried.

"Ron and I...we're not friends, Hermione." Harry said carefully.

To his surprise, Hermione snorted.

"The one thing I know, is that no matter how badly you two fight, you'll always be friends." Hermione said.

Harry sighed, remembering when that seemed very true.

"No, not anymore." Harry said seriously, shaking his head.

"What happened?" She asked quietly.

"Nothing happened. Nothing like that. I'm not angry at him, Hermione, and he's not angry at me, not anymore. That's how we know it's done. I'm just, not his friend." Harry summarized.

"How does that happen?" She asked again, her voice cracking.

"I've changed a lot this last year, Hermione. As you said, I'm calmer. I'm also, I'd think to think, wiser, more adult, and a good lot more jaded. I've seen and done some shite I won't recount, some of it because it'll hurt the listener too much in the hearing of it. Hermione, I'm starting to become part of a war now, part of a war Ron isn't in. Ron is growing up the easy way, the slow way. I've never had that chance, and I've accepted that and grown up for it. I'm glad that Ron

doesn't have to do that, but that doesn't make him any more my friend, or me his. He doesn't want to go to me about his problems, if he knows I can't relate to them at all."

"He's young." Hermione sighed.

"That's a large part of it, yes." Harry admitted.

"I've noticed that too." She said, smiling slightly. "But Harry, he can be so sweet! I saw him try to get a bird to eat out of his hands once and yes, he's impatient, but when he gets his mind on something he'll think of nothing else until it's done, and that concentration, that spark, it's amazing, and he's funny, you must remember that, you were friends." She tried, gearing their walk from the lake back toward Hogwarts.

"We were." Harry said simply.

Hermione sighed, and ran a hand through her hair. Harry blinked as her hand didn't get caught on a thousand tangled curls and grinned as he noticed that it now flowed straight down her shoulders.

"You transfigured your hair." Harry commented, biting his lip to keep from laughing at his memory of the class when she'd asked how.

"I did! It worked perfectly!" She said, her bubbly mood returning immediately. Harry let himself laugh, smiling at the ease of it.

"I was gunna kill Luna when she mentioned it." Hermione said, laughing with him.

"She'd have deserved it." Harry said, grinning as he shared the joke.

"Oh, and it would have been a damn slow death too. Agonizing." Hermione growled.



Harry felt his laugh die again, choking in his throat with the smells of Mundungus Fletcher dying for hours in a dungeon with the Dark Lord.

"Harry?" Hermione called, pulling him out of it.

"I'm fine." Harry said, forcing a smile onto his face.

"But, are you okay with Ron and I anyway?" She asked, biting her lip again.

"It's fine." Harry said.

"But how's it going to work? I'm used to the two of you glaring at each other or not talking to each other, what am I going to do when it's just 'civil'?" She asked.

"I don't know. If it helps I'm not sure I'll be around school all that much this year." Harry said honestly.

"But that's how you're going to handle it, isn't it? You'll just be polite and let him respond in whatever way he wants." Hermione growled.

"Most likely." Harry replied honestly, smiling at her.

"Gah!" She exclaimed annoyedly. Harry laughed, and decided to walk with her back to the castle. He'd ask his question to Hagrid in a letter later.

Harry walked with Hermione into the castle, surprised when she didn't question him turning away from the route to Gryffindor tower, taking the first staircase that led to the owlry. She followed him, babbling about how her days away from the Weasleys had gone, and how dismayed her parents had been in finding her first cavity. Harry talked and commiserated with her casually until they entered the owlry and he conjured himself a pen and parchment to write.

Dear Hagrid,

How were your holidays? I just got back and I have a question for you. Would you be willing to teach me how to ride Buckbeak in the mornings? Maybe around 5:00 AM or so?

Thanks,

Harry

"You're getting much better at transfigurations," Hermione complimented as Harry attached the note to Hedwig's leg.

"There you go, girl." Harry said to Hedwig, brushing his hand down her back once before turning back to Hermione.

"Practice will do that," He said, glad she'd seemingly put his destructive studying behind them.

"Oh, speaking of which, I was wondering what you'd actually said in that speech. I mean, I couldn't believe that crap Rita Skeeter said, but is it true that you did make a deal with the Minister?" She asked.

"And what does that have to do with practicing transfigurations?" Harry asked, blinking at her.

"Oh...nothing I suppose, but all the same-" She started.

"I did stand with the Minister, as he is right that a show of solidarity is needed," Harry said, watching as Hedwig took off through the window, almost disappearing against the white of the snowy grounds.

"You did?! Well, you should have made a deal with him at the very least. I mean, he's the Minister, surely you could have gotten

something out of him, had you tried," Hermione started.

"Hermione, I did make a deal with him," Harry said, stopping her before he got too annoyed with her suggestions.

"Oh," she said, sounding embarrassed. "Well?," she asked.

"I can do magic outside of school." Harry said, deciding quickly that someone in the battels had surely already passed along the information to more dangerous ears.

"Seriously?!" Hermione exclaimed happily, beaming at him.

"It's been useful." Harry said.

"I'm sure! You must have gotten all of your break work done so easily!" she cried.

"I did none of it." Harry corrected, shaking his head as he turned to walk with her out of the owlery. He hadn't even known there was work to do over break for his classes.

"Oh, 'cause your health?" She asked awkwardly.

"No, because I'm not really doing any of my classwork anymore, Hermione. I wasn't before my health failed either. I'm not learning how to transfigure wombats into watches just to show some N.E.W.T official that I can anymore. I need to study spells I can use."

"But Harry, transfiguration is very important!" Hermione started, sounding offended.

"I know it is. I've studied a good bit of it, but you've missed my point. I mean I'm not studying to pass a test, I'm studying to win a war." Harry placated.

"Still-" Hermione hummed.

Harry started down the steps with her, looking for a change of subject.

"How involved in the war are you, Harry?" she asked suddenly.

Harry considered the question quietly as continued down the steps, sighing slightly to himself as he found what seemed like an accurate answer.

"Not very," he said, "but hopefully that won't last for long."

"Hopefully?" she clarified.

"Yes." Harry replied, his voice sure.

"Okay," she said seriously, "good luck."

Harry looked at her out of the corner of his eye, feeling his respect for her rise though he didn't know why.

"Thank you." he replied.

'Ta, y'all. I'm uploading this a day early 'cause otherwise you won't get it until pretty late tomorrow.

.

~~HP~~

Harry woke in his dorm room, shutting off his 4:30 AM alarm as quickly as he could so as not to wake his dorm mates. He sat up quickly and cast a heating spell around himself to chase away the morning cold.

What am I doing here?, Harry wondered, looking around at the students sleeping casually on either side of him and feeling as if he were caught in a dream.

Harry was broken from his reverie by a hard tap at the window by a very disgruntled-looking Hedwig.

How long has she been waiting there?, Harry wondered, walking quickly over to the window and accepting the sharp peck she laid on his hand as she waddled her way onto the inside sill, a letter tied to her leg.

Harry! It's good to know you and Hermione are back, it's been lonely here without you. I'd love to teach you like I should have done in yer third year! I don't know why you want to come so early but I wake at four everyday to start the feedings. Come after that then, will ye?

Hagrid

Harry scanned the letter again quickly and burned it up quickly before getting dressed and starting on his stretches for his morning exercise.

He was outside as the birds just started to chirp, light just beginning

to rise over the thick snow. He heated the path in front of himself to walk quickly down the path, and waved above his head at the large forms of Hagrid and Buckbeak he could see in the distance. Hagrid waved back and Harry forced himself to walk, unwilling to use any of his exercise time in a useless run when he might be able to spend it finally learning to stay amount.

"Harry!" Hagrid shouted as Harry finally got into earshot.

"Morning!" Harry yelled back, hoping they were far enough from the castle to avoid waking anyone up.

"So ye want to learn to ride, do ye?" Hagrid said, his large hand holding an entire bucket up for Buckbeak to eat from.

Harry watched Buckbeak pull what looked like a full rabbit leg from the bucket and throw it into the air, only to catch and swallow it immediately.

"I do." Harry said, looking over the animal. "After learning to ride Buckbeak I'd be able to ride any horse-like animal, right?" he asked.

"Sure, long as it aint a centaur or a thestral. Those'll usually kill ya as soon as they spot a saddle." Hagrid said.

"Oh, I want to learn bareback." Harry said, blinking at the news about the thestrals.

Good thing I never thought of saddles then, he thought, feeling his heartbeat pick up at the thought.

"No ye don't, that damn uncomfortable til ye a damn good rider." Hagrid said, his thick beard swinging back and forth as he shook his head.

"I rode Buckbeak without one." Harry pointed out.

"And it wasn't what anyone would call comfortable, was it?" Hagrid replied, his eyebrows disappearing into his hair.

"Point taken." Harry replied, smiling and walking with Hagrid as the half-giant put down Buckbeak's bucket and started walking toward the chickens. "Still though, I want to learn," Harry insisted.

"Well, alright, but only 'cause there aren't any damn saddles in the whole castle. Aint a creature but Buckbeak here who'd put up with 'um," Hagrid said, petting his hand down the hippogriff's side.

"Awesome," Harry said, relieved.

"First the animals. Remember that, don't go thinking of riding or working any animal in the morning before you feed 'im. That's just impolite." Hagrid said, tossing Harry a huge burlap bag.

Harry braced himself and caught it, blessing his weeks of recovery that kept him from falling over under its weight.

"Chicken feed?" Harry guessed.

"Yeah. Cut that open and fill the troughs, would ye? By the time ye get atop Buckbeak there, I'll be done with feeding Fang and gettin what we'll be needin'."

"Alright." Harry said, waiting for Hagrid to disappear into the hut before he took out his wand to cut the bag open and carefully banish the feed into the troughs.

Once done he waited for Buckbeak to finish eating and clucked his tongue to get his attention.

Harry bowed deeply, remembering to lower his eyes unlike for the thestrals. He stood and watched as Buckbeak bowed himself and

walked a bit closer to the creature.

"Alright, as you've heard I'm trying to learn how to ride, and I don't know what Hagrid will have me doing but would you be willing to help?" Harry asked the hippogriff, finally looking into his orange eyes. To his surprise the hippogriff headed toward the chicken coop, glancing back at him to ensure he was looking, before biting firmly down on a rope attached to a nearby fencepost.

"Okay..rope." Harry said.

To his surprise the Hippogriff snorted, sounding almost like Hermione.

"Yeah, I'm an idiot, I know." Harry replied, grinning.

"Oh shite, that's the rope Hagrid tied you with when the Ministry was going to kill you. We-we saved your life." Harry remembered.

Note to self, these creatures are fucking smart, Harry told himself, watching as the hippogriff dropped the rope and trotted over to him.

"Alright, so I can mount?" Harry asked, beginning to walk toward the creature.

"Alrighty, Harry, so where do we start?" Hagrid boomed. Harry jerked back, startled, and saw Buckbeak's eyes swirl in their sockets, before the creature started rearing lightly, it's claws scraping at the ground.

"Woah, woah, woah, stop yer fussin'," Hagrid ordered, pulling on Buckbeak's mane.

"Er..Hagrid, isn't it dangerous to be tugging on a hippogriff?" Harry asked cautiously, watching as Buckbeak turned its eye to glare at the half-giant.



"Well, normally, you'd be right, yah. But not with ol' Buckbeak here. He's a sweetie, and real domesticated, long as you don't go offending 'im that is." Hagrid said, shrugging his huge shoulders as he pet the settled hippogriff's wide back.

"I suppose I should have mentioned that." Hagrid said aloud, staring at the morning clouds.

"Mentioned what?" Harry asked, glancing upwards.

"Well, don't go telling anyone mind, but Buckbeak's not like most hippogriffs. It's why I started ye third years on 'im. He's tame now, I raised him and the other twelve secret in the forest, and they'll even try to keep ye on 'um. With Dumbledore's permission of course, 'long as they stay safe there. But ye can't just go wanderin and bowin up to any hippogriff, you'll get your face sheared clean off, no question." He said.

"And uh, you didn't tell that to our class, so.."

"Well, let's just hope none of you all take a fancy to hippogriffs without bein' proper careful." Hagrid said.

"After Malfoy, I doubt it." Harry said, shaking his head.

Dumbledore should not have allowed Hagrid to introduce thirteen year olds to these creatures, Harry thought, glancing over the huge carnivore beside him.

"True." Hagrid said, a frown deepening on his face at the mention of the boy. "Alright there Harry, you jump on Buckbeak here but I'm gunna keep you on a leadline and just have you walk aroun' in circles 'til you get your seat right. Once you get a good seat, ridin's easy."

"You can ride, Hagrid?" Harry asked in surprise.

Why the hell would I have asked him to teach me if he couldn't?, Harry only wondered then, wanting to smack himself. He just associated Hagrid with animals, but he didn't have to be stupid about it.

"Not these little beasts, no, but the magical world's got more than thestrals and hippogriffs, don't it?" Hagrid said mysteriously, grinning like mad at a memory.

"What did you ride?" Harry asked quickly.

"Oh, nothin', Harry, nothin'. Let's get you amount." Hagrid said, patting his heavy hand down on Harry's shoulders distractedly as he tied a rope around Buckbeak's neck.

"Alright then, Beaky, you walk in a circle and we'll have this boy flyin' safe in no time." Hagrid grinned.

"Awesome," said Harry.

~~HP~~

Not awesome, Harry thought when he got off an hour later, his hips feeling half pulled from their sockets and his thighs aching.

More muscles I haven't trained, Harry winced, hearing Hagrid laugh at his bow-legged posture as he started working his way back to the castle.

And I still have to run today, Harry groaned.

He got back to his dorm and grabbed his clean clothing, looking forward to relaxing his muscles in the hot shower.

He headed down to the Great Hall as soon as he was finished, knowing it had just opened and would still be quiet. He stepped

inside and glanced around the tables, glad to see that only a few Ravensclaws and a Hufflepuff were awake. The three were sitting together at the Ravensclaw table, eating their meals in silence in what looked like a usual routine.

Harry walked over to where they were surrounded by filled platters of different foods, deciding quickly that there was no point in wasting food by calling an entire meal of his own at the Griffindor table.

"Alright, Harry?" One of the Ravensclaw third-years, a sandy-haired boy, called as soon as Harry reached the quiet spot.

"Alright." Harry replied, glancing over the boy's face to ensure that he didn't know him.

"Bradley Maranvich." The boy introduced, sticking out his hand.

"Harry." Harry replied awkwardly, shaking the hand and blinking at the boy. He felt like the boy was doing something rude but he couldn't figure what.

"I'm just here to grab some breakfast if it's alright. Figure there's no point calling my own platters." Harry said, gesturing to the food at the center of the table.

"No, no, not at all!" The other Ravensclaw boy called loudly, before blushing.

They remind me of Ron and Hermione, way back when, Harry thought, smiling.

"Thank you." He said politely, tapping the table for his own plate and loading it with as balanced a meal as he could.

"No worries." The Hufflepuff said calmly. Harry smiled at her, and walked toward his own table, glancing at where Snape sat perched

alone at the professor's table. Snape glared at him fiercely and Harry had to hide a grin as he sat and pulled White Fang out of his pocket.

He read, and ate, and thought about his schedule. He had History of Magic, then Defense Against the Dark Arts with Moody, and Advanced Transfigurations that day, what the hell would he learning?

I can't even pay attention, if I don't want my five hours of studying wasted, Harry scoffed, feeling the schedule start to grate.

Except I'm supposed to go in and see Madam Pomfrey today, Harry reminded himself. Hopefully she'd declare him fit to work more.

So what, I ride every morning, then go to breakfast, go to Madam Pomfrey's, study on my own in class, eat lunch, study in Advanced Transfiguration, and then go out to investigate the names Rashanon gave me?

After I deal with the real names from the battle, Harry decided.

Harry sighed, forcing himself to eat slowly until he'd swallowed every bite from his plate.

Now what? Harry thought, pulling out his wand to cast tempus. It was 6:17; the infirmary wasn't open yet.

Harry picked up his fork to fiddle with, staring at how his the muscles in his hands contorted.

Damn it, what am I even doing here?, Harry asked himself, wanting to growl. His so-called 'classes' were not going to help him any, that had been true at the start of the year and would only be moreso now.

Hogwarts was just a school, and a school he didn't need. His friends there were children, and he had a feeling he didn't need them either. They were happy and sixteen years old.

And I'm killing people, Harry thought, letting out a frustrated hiss between his teeth.

He still didn't feel like he was doing much for the war, though. He hardly even knew what the war looked like. Who knew what Voldemort's plans were, and how Dumbledore was planning on stopping them?

At least Dumbledore has fought this war for fifty years, Harry thought to himself, carefully replacing the fork beside his place before he wove his fingers together and started at them.

Old and foolishly compassionate or not, there's no way his plans are worse than any I could come up with, Harry reminded himself, shaking his head.

I know nothing of war.

What am I going to do?, Harry wondered, massaging his hand with the other.

I kill the Death Eaters I know of, and I join in the battles I hear about, but I don't even know how anyone knows where the Death Eaters are going to strike next, Harry growled to himself.

But I am getting better, I did better in the last battle than I did in my first, and I didn't choke like Hoskins, I'm doing okay, Harry told himself.

Okay isn't good enough!

Harry clenched his teeth and dug his thumb into his palm.

I'm supposed to be the best I can be, and I'm barely better than the average pacifist Order member. I at least kill people but I've

managed what, 10? And five of them away from the battles entirely?

I've killed five people, Harry stopped, staring at the wall in front of him. He glanced at his hands and ran his fingertips over his palm, feeling the softness of the skin there, and rubbed his hands together to chase away the itch.

Five people didn't go home to their families because of me, he thought, bringing his hands up to run them over his face before he pushed them in front of his eyes to stare at the muscles contort again.

How am I dealing with that? How am I just sitting here at the Gryffindor breakfast table, eating after that?

Harry sighed, bringing his hands down to stare at the opposite wall, images of Voldemort's raids, the battles, and dead couples in their beds painted in front of his eyes.

I'll win this war, Harry promised himself, I have to win this war.

But how, he agonized.

I know nothing of war.

Then learn it, part of his mind told him firmly. He'd known nothing of transfigurations either, and books had taught him what he needed to practice.

And again, Hogwarts isn't teaching me what I want to know, Harry thought, suddenly wishing Defense against the Dark Arts was a course designed on how to conduct magical warfare.

The muggles know war, Harry reminded himself. He'd start with them.

But first I need to get firmly out of this school schedule. He wasn't going to classes, he wasn't studying or taking the tests, why was he at Hogwarts at all?

I'm wasting my time, Harry thought, feeling his head start to nod in his conviction. He needed to talk to Dumbledore.

I'll owl him as soon as possible, Harry decided firmly,.

Harry finished his drink, forcing himself to drink slowly until he'd gotten down every drop. Only then did he allow himself to rush, tapping the table to clear his place even as he ran toward the Owlery.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I'd like to talk to you, if possible. What time would be best for you?,

Thank you,

Harry.

Harry wrote carefully before quickly tying the note to Hedwig's foot and sending her out again.

I'm making her fly too much. I should use the other owls, Harry thought, watching her go.

~~HP~~

"You're healthy now, Mr. Potter." Madam Pomfrey announced, sounding almost regretful. "Your organ system is working perfectly again, your muscle is clearly filling in well, and you seem rested."

"I am rested." Harry assured her, nodding.

"Good." She said sharply, flicking her wand at her measuring tape,

which obediently rolled up with a snap.

"Would you like to stay that way?" She asked carefully, her face furrowed in a deep frown.

"I would." Harry said.

"Fine, better said, will you stay this way?" She asked, shaking her head quickly.

"What would I have to do?" Harry asked, glancing over the infirmary as he thought, "Five hours is too little to be able to get anything real done. It's not even a work day." He offered.

"You'll do this. You'll eat at least two meals a day, better three or even four with how much I'm sure you'll work yourself. You'll drink three glasses of water a day, at least, and no more than ten. You'll sleep at very least five hours a night, with no more than two exceptions a week, unless you talk to me. You'll study or be doing exercise no more than ten hours a day, unless you talk to me for an exception, and you'll try to take breaks every two hours, unless you talk to me for an exception. In other words, Mr. Potter, you'll talk to me." Madam Pomfrey said quickly.

"You've thought about this." Harry grinned.

"You almost died, Mr. Potter." Madam Pomfrey said quietly, shaking her head.

"I'll obey you." Harry promised.

It's doable, Harry thought, thinking over his new schedule with relief.

"You will," Madam Pomfrey nodded, "I've gotten you just as obsessed with your health as you are about everything else."



"I'm not obsessed about everything." Harry argued.

Pomfrey glared at him lightly through the corner of her eye.

"I'm not!, I care nothing for synchronized swimming." He professed, holding a hand over his heart.

"You're a pain, Mr. Potter." Madam Pomfrey said, though her eyes were smiling.

"I am." Harry agreed, just before Hedwig landed on the windowsill outside and started clicking her beak against the glass.

"Owls? In an infirmary? No, no, no, you go to the owlry to meet her." Pomfrey ordered, shooing him away.

"May I just open the window? She won't come inside." Harry promised.

"Gah, go ahead, you'll do it anyway, no wonder." She said, putting her hands on her hips and shaking her head at him.

Harry nodded his thanks and opened the window slowly, giving Hedwig time to hop to the side to get out of the way.

"There you go, girl. I'm sorry but you can't come inside, the witch is in here." Harry said sincerely, petting his hand down her back and taking the letter carefully. Hedwig bit his thumb carefully in greeting, and flew off without a squawk.

He'd barely finished backing away from the window before he felt a hand smacking him lightly upside the head.

"Witch, my arse." Madam Pomfrey growled.

She seriously just said that?, Harry thought, laughing and ducking

away from her.

"I'm terribly sorry, but I believe I've got to go." Harry announced, bowing slightly.

"Go on, get out of here. You've spent too much time in this ward in your life already, and I've certainly spent too much time looking at you." Pomfrey joked waving her hand at him.

"Thanks so much." Harry said sarcastically, laughing again as he turned and left, already opening the letter from Dumbledore.

Dear Harry,

It is wonderful to hear from you so early. I am awake and in my office, and I daresay I'll be here beyond when you require.

Dumbledore's

Okay..., Harry thought, reading over the strange letter again before burning it in his hand and starting to walk toward the Headmaster's office.

"Harry!" Someone called before he'd gone more than ten meters. Harry stopped and looked toward the voice.

Colin Creevey was rushing up the staircase beside him, waving ecstatically. Harry winced as Colin tripped slightly by the top of the flight and had to catch himself on the railing. The boy barely seemed to notice though, picking himself up to run forward toward him again.

"Hi, Harry, where've you been!" he asked as soon as he was in front of Harry.

"Hello, Colin, and I've been on break." Harry replied, smiling as politely as he could manage.

"Yes, yes, that's not what I meant, I meant yesterday! You weren't at the Griffindor common room celebration." He panted.

"No I wasn't," Harry agreed simply, before deciding to answer the boy, "I went to bed early."

"Oh, right, right," Colin said, nodding quickly as if he were memorizing it all.

"Yes, but, er, Colin, would you mind very much if I were to continue on? I'm in a bit of a rush." Harry asked, itching to continue.

"No, it's fine." Colin smiled forgivingly. Harry nodded to him gratefully, and waved lightly before continuing on his way.

Harry stared at the wards on Dumbledore's staircase, wondering if earning some of the headmaster's respect was worth giving away one of his biggest secrets.

Dumbledore cares too much to betray me, and he needs to listen to me, Harry decided finally.

He'll think I lowered the wards and recreated them behind myself, Harry thought, nodding to himself.

He shifted his magical signature and stepped past the gargoyles up the staircase, knocking once on the wooden door for politeness's sake before he simply opened it through all of its wards, and walked inside.

"Harry." Dumbledore greeted from behind his desk, his rapid blinking the only thing betraying his surprise. "You took my note about 'anytime' quite literally I see. Good morning. Chocolate bunny?" he offered, pointing at the miniature rabbits sleeping in the bowl at the end of his desk.

"Those are usually for Easter, professor." Harry said as he sat down.

"True, but they're two sickles cheaper in January." Dumbledore said, plopping on in his mouth smugly.

"And four cheaper in May." Harry retorted quietly, blinking and feeling off-set.

"So I shall have them again. It's good fortune they're so tasty, isn't it?"

Dumbledore smiled.

"I'd like to drop out of Hogwarts, professor." Harry said.

"Ah, it's finally that day, is it?" Dumbledore sighed, nodding.

"You expected this?" Harry asked, his eyebrows furrowing.

"I did, I realized you had out-paced us months ago, and so I told your teachers to allow it."

"Thank you," Harry answered.

"No, alas that is again the last thing you should do," Dumbledore said, shaking his head slowly as he seemed to sink into his chair. "Yet again, I chose wrong," he said.

"I needed to master magic, professor," Harry argued.

"Indeed, that's true," Dumbledore said, nodding, "and yet again your professor's trust in my decision led to what was worst for you. This time it allowed for your spiraling poor health, and yet I was not aware nor around to help you myself. It seems, once again, my foolish actions in attempting to care for you have led to your stay in our infirmary. And this time you were not able to bounce out of it in a day,

just as cheerful and happy as before." Dumbledore said, the wrinkles below his eyes seeming to deepen.

"Professor-" Harry started, needing to say anything to help the man.

"No, Harry, this time it is most certainly not your turn to take care of me." Dumbledore refused, shaking his head. "Old age is difficult, my boy, you'll learn that some day I dare hope. My thoughts seem just as clear, and yet fail at every turn, and it seems I can no longer sift foolishness from wisdom." he said. "And alas, for the first time, I truly fear for this war."

"Professor, are you saying you aren't going to fight anymore?" he asked, feeling scared.

"Indeed no, my boy, I can not retire on the Order. I am saying that I can no longer interfere with you, as I have lost all judgment on the matter." Dumbledore clarified. "My boy, you may drop out of this school, if you'd like. Allowing you that may be the last truly wise move I can make against Voldemort, if I may even dare call it that." Dumbledore said sadly.

"It is wise, Professor. I'll use my time and win this war." Harry promised.

"Is it really, though?" Dumbledore asked, shaking his head, "I cannot say. You have a good alibi here, and a good illusion of being 'only a student'. Most respect men out in the world, and yet who fears a schoolboy?"

"You think I should stay?" Harry asked, frowning in thought.

"Alas, you miss my point, my boy. I say, I cannot think one way or the other. I can simply allow it, and hope that you are wiser than me, or that you will learn to be in time." Dumbledore replied.

Oh, Harry realized, dropping his eyes to the floor.

I can seem weak if I stay here, and simply don't go to class. If I'm in school and sneaking out, I seem like a rebellious teenager. If I'm a man sneaking out of anywhere, I look dangerous, Harry accepted, nodding to himself.

But I need to be respected to gain any support, Harry reminded himself frustratedly.

Could I gain that support and respect just with speeches?, he wondered, remembering Derrick Hoskins's formality with him.

Derrick respected me after the battle, not after the speech, Harry thought, shaking his head, I can gain respect by fighting.

But the Death Eaters will see me fighting too, and Voldemort will hear about all that I do.

Voldemort is inclined to disrespect me though, and the wizarding world wants to think of me as a perfect child savior. If I stay matriculated at Hogwarts, neither respect me, if I leave, the wizarding world is more likely to respect me, but Voldemort is less likely to underestimate me.

I earned Hoskins' respect despite being a 'schoolboy', I can do that again.

But is that best? Could I get a bigger force if I don't? Am I going to get a force either way?

If I leave I'll have no reason to see Snape. If I seem to visit him of my own free will, he's rather obviously a spy for the Death Eaters, but at the moment he's forcing me to see him by forcing me into this 'class'.

I can't make my decision based on Snape, I must make it based on

the war.

And it seems to balance out for the war, good effects and bad.

"I'll stay." Harry decided aloud, glancing up at Dumbledore.

He said alibi, Harry caught, blinking up at the old man.

Does he know that I'll need an alibi for my nights? How much does he know? Harry wondered, staring at the man.

"Dumbledore, how much do you know about what I am doing?" Harry asked cautiously.

"Alas, it seems it does not matter, my boy." Dumbledore said calmly.

"I need to know," Harry insisted.

"It seems this is the last time I may withhold unnecessary information from you, my boy, the least you can do is let me have it." Dumbledore said, holding his head high.

"You're tiresome, do you know that?" Harry asked, a smile starting on his own face.

"Indeed, I do. Are you sure you don't want a chocolate rabbit? They're quite festive." Dumbledore asked, his eyes starting to glimmer, though Harry wasn't sure whether it was with happiness or forced-back tears.

"They will be in four months, professor." Harry said, beginning to stand.

Wait, Harry thought to himself, sitting himself again.

"Dumbledore, would you tell me everything you know about this

war?" Harry asked, staring at him.

"That, at least, is not unnecessary." Dumbledore agreed, leaning back in his chair. "Though I do suggest the candies, as it will take the better part of today to do so."

"Perhaps tea, professor?" Harry suggestion, smiling.

Dumbledore flicked his hand, and a set of tea appeared on his desk.

Harry started to laugh, feeling the magic.

"You have everyone convinced you've mastered conjuring food. You've just summoned it." Harry laughed.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled, and he moved the tea to lift a trap door in the desk beneath it.

"One can magic water, and move teabags, it alas is not all that difficult to put them together."

"And a heating spell, of course," Harry agreed, taking the cup Dumbledore offered him.

"You can feel magic, my boy." Dumbledore said.

"I can." Harry agreed, nodding. It felt good to trust and tell the truth, and even if he felt Dumbledore did it too often, Harry knew that secret would stay safe.

"That says a lot." Dumbledore said simply, taking his own tea and studying Harry with his eyes.

"The war?" Harry reminded him, leaning forward.

"Yes." Dumbledore sighed, getting up slowly and spelling the teapot



to follow him. "Maps, first, my boy." he said. "I'll start with a bit of history, where the biggest battles have happened, and how they went, and how they were won or lost. I admit, my memory is not how it once was, but I suspect it shall be more than up for the task. Losses, apparently, become quite engraved on the mind of the commander who planned them."

Looks like my plan for the day has changed, Harry thought.

~~HP~~

Harry walked out of Dumbledore's office two hours later with three maps to study, a hypothetical situation, and an assignment to make up an attack strategy.

Looks like I do have something to learn here, Harry thought, pleased, as he headed down to the Great Hall for a second breakfast, hungry again and sure all of the upper-year Hogwarts students would be there before their 9:30 classes.

Harry entered the Great Hall again, letting the din of shouting students wash over him as he headed over to where he saw the older Gryffindors gathered.

"Harry!" Hermione greeted excitedly as he sat down.

"Hello." Harry greeted back, glancing around the table at Ron, Neville, Seamus and Ginny.

"Harry." Ron said formally with a quick nod, though he looked to be pouting.

He doesn't know how to act, Harry thought sadly.

"Good morning," Harry replied, unsure how to respond. Ron seemed intent on ignoring him, staring sullenly at his half-empty plate, so Harry tapped the table for a clean dish and started to load it up with food from the platters.

"How'd break go, Harry?" Neville asked, glancing lightly at Ron in question.

"It was fun." Harry responded blandly, nodding back as subtly as he could.

"Are you gunna join the Quidditch team, now that you're alive again?" Seamus asked loudly before rushing a large amount of scrambled

eggs into his mouth.

"I'm not." Harry replied simply, watching as Seamus barely managed to keep his eggs in his mouth as he gaped in shock.

"Oh, Harry, you're exactly who I wanted to talk to." Hermione cut in loudly, glaring at Seamus.

Harry smiled at her reassuringly, and raised his eyebrows. Hermione turned away to dig in her bag noisily, finally drawing out a rolled up issue of the Daily Prophet and spreading it out in front of him.

"I forgot to really ask before, though I did start on it. I noticed in the paper what that devil-woman wrote about you, and I said before that I knew it was false, and that you answered that it mostly wasn't, that you were working with the Minister in all seriousness-"

"Hermione. Slow. What's up?" Harry interrupted, smiling at her. Hermione blushed and took a deep breath.

"Right. I wanted to ask what you really said. It gives that little excerpt about coming together to do our part, but it said you said all that, quote: "standing proudly in front of the large gathered crowd". Did you say anything further, cause it sounds there like you did, and I was wondering if that Rita Skeeter was taking you out of context again." She said.

"Rita Skeeter didn't write anything wrong, assuming hope was in fact 'clear in my bright eyes'," Harry replied. "I suppose it's true that she'll do anything for a story but she already had one there. To answer your question though, I did give a speech, yes, and that wasn't all of it."

"You gave a speech?" Neville asked, looking almost scared by the idea.

"Yes," Harry said.

"Well, can I read it? I'm thinking we should publish it, 'cause that little bit was really good, Harry," Hermione complimented, "I'll even edit it if you want!"

"How would you get it published?" Harry asked.

"I was thinking Luna's dad, you know how he helped you before, I was thinking this time, with it so important that people trust you again-" Hermione started, her eyes brightening in excitement.

"Telling my story in the Quirrel was one thing, but I hardly think it wants to become a war paper," Harry said.

"We could always try though, Harry!"

"Sure," Harry said, thinking it didn't sound very likely.

I have to start getting public somehow though, Harry accepted, nodding to himself as he ate.

"Harry, I told my dad you want to publish your speech in the Quibbler. He said alright, but you need to get him a full copy of it by Friday."

Harry turned at Luna's voice and saw her standing behind him.

"Er..perfect, thanks." Harry replied, blinking in his surprise.

Okay that was fantastically easier than I predicted, Harry thought.

"Okay, I like Luna and all, but that was just weird." Hermione said as soon as Luna had wandered out of earshot. "Ron, did you tell her what we were talking about before?"

"I don't talk to her," Ron replied, shaking his head. "I mean, I like her

well enough, she sorta grows on you, but I don't really know her."

"She is like a hydrangea that way, isn't she?" Neville said, looking up at the ceiling pensively.

I suppose that means something profound, Harry thought, blinking at him in confusion. It felt strange being confused, felt like he was supposed to go out and research hydrangeas now.

"I guess she just overheard us and is trying to make friends." Ginny said, biting her lip.

"Shit, that's a creepy way of going about it," Seamus said, looking over at where Luna was sitting down with some second-years.

"She's always been like that, and it always backfires." Hermione said, following Seamus's eye.

"She does bring it upon herself though," Seamus said, shaking his head.

"Yeah, but it still sucks," Ginny replied, turning back to her food.

"Still, good, you get your article published, assuming Luna's dad actually will agree when she asks him." Hermione answered.

"And easier than I expected," Harry replied, watching Luna as she talked with the younger students.

"So...about that Quidditch-" Seamus started hopefully.

"Oh, shut up," Hermione growled, rolling her eyes. "Leave him alone."

Harry grinned, watching as Seamus shrank back, shaking his head.

~~HP~~

Harry walked down the tunnel toward Honeydukes, his invisibility cloak dangling casually from his arm. As soon as he felt himself pass out of the anti-apparation wards, he stripped off his robes and pushed all of his wizard clothing into his backpack. He smiled at the memory of using his same backpack to escape from the Dursleys into London, before concentrating on the muggle street where he wanted to go, and cracking into existence in front of the Camberley branch of Surrey County Library.

Harry smiled at the building's brown brick and glass entryway. He'd gone to the building every time he'd managed to disappear as a child, though he hadn't ever dared apply for a library card or check anything out.

"Excuse me, sir, I'd like to apply for a library card if I could," Harry said to the bald teenager across the front desk from him.

"Good morning, Ma'am, fill these out." The teenager replied, blinking widely as if attempting to keep himself awake.

Harry smelled beer on the exhausted-looking librarian as he took the forms and repressed a grin as he started on filling out his name and the Dursley's address.

He left with twenty-five military strategy books in his arms, maxing out what the library allowed a new card-holder.

"You're a man, sorry about that, I'm drunk. Have a nice day." The teenager said as Harry left, laughing to himself.

Harry apparated as soon as he found a dark corner to hide in, desperate to get his heavy books shrunk and into the pockets of his robes.

He was fifteen minutes late for History of Magic, but Binns, as always, didn't seem to notice at all. Hermione did though, Harry thought, seeing her look at him oddly. He'd always been exactly on time before break, Harry understood, shaking his head at her quickly.

He accio'd book from his pocket and enlarged it, turning quickly to the first page of The Art of War by Sun Tzu.

Harry looked up shortly later, staring at the wall as he repeated to himself what he'd read.

All warfare is based on deception.

Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near.

This is why Dumbledore was telling me to stay here as a student. Perhaps to seem inactive. So he knows I'm doing more than I seem, and we both hope that Voldemort doesn't find that out for a long while.

This is why Dumbledore thinks Snape is invaluable, Harry thought. We need spies. We need a way to find them, keep them alive, and get information from them, and get bad information to the enemy and it seems like all we've got so far is Snape.

If Snape is loyal, he is invaluable, Harry thought, nodding to himself. And if he's not, he's a serious danger.

And either way he is seriously brave and in serious danger.

Harry sighed, bringing up his memory of the maps and trying to figure out any smart way of attacking the defenses on them. The Death Eaters had three buildings protected, all with anti-apparation wards,

and each with a lookout on the edge of the wards, keeping a detection spell on the other building's magic, so if one ward was broken, all three camps would know. The strength of the wards was unknown, as the lookouts would recognize any detection spell cast on them and ruin the advantage of surprise for any attack.

So we can't go in and bring down one buildings's wards and kill everyone before they yell, for the other camps will still know. We could try for all of them at once, but that will give them time to prepare to apparate away as soon as the wards fall. We'd gain the buildings but that's useless. The fight would be missed entirely.

Well..wait, they have apparation wards, which take at least 10 minutes to bring down, even with multiple people fighting them. What if we block them in, and take their oxygen from the outside?

They'd be able to apparate out before they run out of air from what's already in the building, Harry realized, cursing silently to himself.

Not if we set up our own anti-apparation ward as they are trying to bring their own down, Harry thought, nodding to himself. They can either wait, and die, or come out and fight. The apparation ward would then be ours, and we could start preparing to take it down as soon as they start coming out.

Harry nodded to himself, and wrote down his idea on a piece of paper as Dumbledore requested before he returned to his book, hoping for advice in thinking of another, hopefully better strategy.

His professors left him alone to work as they taught, and went slowly to the Great Hall, stepping once again into the noise and deciding to sit at the empty end of the table where he could hear himself think. He took out White Fang, again, returning to the story of the starving wolves as he tapped the table and started in on his food, blessing the fake silence he felt when in a book and loving that during his meals he could read instead of study.



"Hi, Harry!" Colin Creevey interrupted, rolling up and down on his heels slightly. Harry stared at him for a second before he processed that the boy was talking to him again.

"Sorry, Colin, but I'm reading. Talk to me any other time." Harry refused, shaking his head.

"But I just want your signature on one more-"

"No, Colin, leave me alone. I have very little free time, please permit me to enjoy it while it lasts." Harry said firmly.

"Fine, but I'm not going to let you sit here alone." Colin said, plumping himself down next to him on the bench, already picking up a fork to bang on his hand impatiently.

Oh my god, Harry growled to himself.

"Mr. Creevey," Harry heard sneered and looked up to see Snape towering over them, a sneer open on his lips.

"P-p-professor." Colin replied, smiling innocently and seeming to gasp his words through it.

"I need to speak with your adored idol here." Snape said, running his tongue over his teeth after he spoke.

"Yes, sir." Colin said, nodding.

Harry watched as Snape closed his eyes slightly in disbelief.

"I believe he means alone, Colin." Harry said as kindly as he could.

"Are you sure you want me to leave?" Colin whispered too loudly, "I'll stay for you, Harry!"

"The professor insists." Harry replied, trying not to laugh.

"Right." Colin replied, getting up quickly. "I'll see you around, Harry!" he called loudly as he walked toward where his brother was waiting.

"A problem, professor?" Harry asked, trying to force his face into its usual glare at the man.

"And why precisely are you not sitting with your year-mates, Mr. Potter?" Snape sneered.

"I wouldn't want my glory tainted, professor." Harry answered, managing to glare even as he remembered filling the dungeon halls with doves and fanfare.

I can't believe I did that, Harry thought, forcing a smile away from his lips.

"Clearly," Snape replied, sucking his lip into his teeth.

What does he want, Harry wondered, blinking at the man. A year ago I'd say he just wanted to give me a detention but-

Harry stopped, looking at the man carefully,

Perhaps at the moment he needs the exact same thing,

This could be fun, Harry thought, forcing away a grin.

"I would like to discuss the overly evident incompetence that reigned so fully in your last remedial potions with me, Mr. Potter." Snape growled.

Right, Harry thought.

"And I would like to discuss the overly evident incompetence that reigned so fully in your last attempt to teach remedial potions, professor," Harry snarked, wanting to flush as he heard his own words, and realized how familiar they sounded coming from him.

How rude was I, before? Harry wondered, struggling to keep his glare.

"It is an idiocy in itself to attempt to teach you, Mr. Potter, Detention, at 8:00." Snape returned.

"I must admit I agree, professor, and I can't say I understand why you ever went into the field, as you seem so certain to fail at it," Harry agreed, trying not to grin.

"Perhaps for the same line of reasoning you used in becoming a student, Mr. Potter, when you are not only inclined but in fact determined to fail at it," Snape replied.

"Education is a better safeguard of liberty than a standing army," Harry professed, quoting what he'd heard Percy say once before.

Harry swore he saw Snape's mouth twitch.

"Another detention, next week at the same time, for wasting my valuable time with such drivel,"

"That's no fair!" Harry growled, banging his fist on the table and hearing his goblet clatter. He had to fight back a blush as he steadied it.

"Remarkable deduction, Mr. Potter." Snape sneered, before wandering away.

Harry took a deep gulp of his pumpkin juice to hide his smile, and turned back to his book.

He looked up, a paragraph later, to glance around himself and realized that Colin hadn't dared come back. Harry allowed himself to grin fully, and returned to finishing the story of the wolf.

~~HP~~

Harry left Advanced Transfiguration finally, feeling Professor McGonagall's calculating stare at his back. He'd spent the hour studying military strategy on his own, and he suspected she wasn't pleased.

He waved casually to Hermione and slipped into the men's bathroom, swiftly changing back into his invisibility cloak and starting to plan his way out to the thestrals.

I'm an idiot, Harry thought suddenly, staring at the opposite wall and feeling at the school's magic.

Anti-apparation wards are wards. I can go through these, Harry thought, feeling at the magic. The keyhole felt weird, he thought as he shifted his magic to fit it.

Tight and desecrated, Harry thought, not recognizing the feeling of the magic and focusing on it lightly even as he cracked back into existence beside the Forbidden Forest.

"Who's there?" Harry heard Hagrid shout. Harry froze and looked over and saw Hagrid standing with a shovel lifted up, Fang growling beside the huge man's leg.

Oh shit, Harry thought, preparing his magic to push back the dog.

"Oh, Mrrowerl, you old coot. Why in Merlin's name are you hanging around the grounds so much? You know full well we don't need ya til year's end, and you spook the firs' years, them that can see ye. Look

what ye did to ol' Fang here, sounding like a wizard come cracking in." Hagrid grumbled, holding his large hand on Fang's back to still him.

Harry turned and saw Mrrowerl behind him, sniffing at his shirt.

Harry breathed again and cast invisibility spells under his cloak to be sure as he pulled himself up onto the creature's back.

"Gabrien Darlin." Harry barely breathed, naming the first new name the Order had identified in the battle. They'd gotten six. Harry clamped down on the beast with his sore thighs as the thestral turned around and started to trot, bouncing Harry down on bruises he'd gathered in the last ride before he picked up into a canter. Harry barely noticed the pain of riding in his attempt to stay on the racing animal long enough to be slammed back on its back one more time.

~~HP~~

"Kreacher." Harry ordered into the silenced air, leaning over a rooftop in a city street he didn't recognize as he watched a man walk below. The thestral had brought him to the city and pointed its nose toward the man, naming him as the Jordon Fiedsman the sphinx had mentioned.

"Master." Kreacher said, a slight sneer in his voice as he bowed. "What does your idiocy require?"

"Shh, no games." Harry said, waving distractedly before he pointed. "That man. I want to know where he's going, who he's meeting, and what he's doing. I want you to follow him as much as you can, until you think you have definitive evidence whether or not he's a Death Eater. Then report it to me, preferably while I'm not surrounded by people. Try your best not tip him off or show him what you're up to. Don't talk to him at all or write him messages or contact him in any way." He ordered carefully.

Harry thought, trying to make sure there weren't any loopholes in his order that Kreacher could use to betray him.

I want to trust him, he thought, looking at the house-elf regretfully.

"Yes, sir." Kreacher answered, sounding serious now as he bowed.

"I'm sorry I can't trust you on your own," Harry said, sighing.

"I lied to you, Master, and a family member died." Kreacher said simply, before apparating away.

Wow, Harry thought, staring at the place where Kreacher had been.

It was only then that he realized it was not only getting cold and dark in whatever random city Mrrowerl had taken him, but that it was 8:30 PM, and he'd lost track of time.

I'm late for Snape!, Harry thought desperately, spinning around.

"Thanks, Mrrowerl." Harry said, putting a hand on the thestral's neck before he started to concentrate on apparating back to the castle.

I can't, he realized suddenly, stopping his concentration. He didn't have the magic near him to inspect and find the magical signature he had to impersonate.

I'll memorize it, Harry ordered himself.

"Mrrowerl, Hogwarts!" Harry ordered, pulling himself back onto the thestral's back and trying to ignore the gasps of wizardfolk as they spotted the creature.

Unprofessional!, Harry berated himself as he watched the wizards pointing and calling to each other as Mrrowerl took off from the

rooftop into the sky over the city.

He started running back to the castle as soon as his feet hit the frozen mud.

He only remembered to take his invisibility charms and cloak off in front of Snape's door; he'd gotten too used to not seeing his own arms and feet.

Stupid, Harry growled to himself, making himself walk back and forth in front of the office door until his heartrate had slowed. Only when he felt composed again did he let himself knock.

"Enter." Snape called.

Harry walked in, blinking rapidly at what he saw. The third-year Ravenclaw he'd met at breakfast, Bradley, he remembered, was scrubbing down caldrons on top of the office's potions tables.

"You are late, Mr. Potter. I believe I said eight o'clock quite clearly." Snape growled, glancing at the third-year.

"I know, professor." Harry said, nodding slowly as he walked over to the sink in the potions room and scrubbed down his clean hands.

"I suppose you thought yourself better than having to clean with your classmates?," Snape asked from behind him.

"I thought I had something better to do, sir, that much is true," Harry said honestly, hoping Snape would pick up the apology in it.

Harry turned around, casting his hands dry and started toward the third-year.

"Arrogant," Snape declared, raising his lip in apparent disgust.

"Perhaps, professor." Harry admitted, "but that changes nothing,"

"Indeed, you will still have to serve half your detention with Mr. Maranvich, and you will have another detention in the coming week for your evident lack responsibility. 8:00, Mr. Potter, do you believe you can remember that for so long?" He sneered.

He seems actually angry, Harry thought, blinking at the man.

"I already have a detention with you that day, professor." Harry pointed out.

"Friday, and 5 points for interrupting me. Respect, Mr. Potter, do you have any idea what that is?"

The sphinx.

"I can't make Friday." Harry refused, shaking his head and seeing the third-year look up at him in fear and awe.

Yes, I refused Snape, I must be a god, Harry thought, wanting to roll his eyes.

"Very well, you'll lose 50 points for your house, and you'll come the next two Mondays. Satisfactory?" Snape growled.

"Perfect." Harry replied, trying to infuse his voice with sarcasm when he didn't give a shit.

I just spent the last two hours killing two brothers, their father, and a single woman, how the fuck am I in detention now?

Harry sighed, running a hand down his face as if that could drag the stress out of him.

"Troubled, Mr. Potter?" Snape huffed.



"Yes," Harry replied honestly, making it over to the bucket of soapy water the third-year was using, transfiguring a sponge into his hand as he went. He plunged the sponge in and gasped lightly at the cold water, quickly charming it warm before he grabbed what looked like the dirtiest caldron and carried it over to another table. He wanted to be as alone as he could.

Harry sat, silently putting all of his force into scrubbing out the granular brown crud off the bronze surface.

His sponge and hands were filthy in seconds. Harry wiped his hand off on the table top before he slipped his wand out of its arm holster and quickly transfigured what he had of the crud into a small bucket and filled it with water. He looked around and saw the soap chips beside the third-year. He accioed them, catching them with his left hand as they approached, even as he turned his face and wand to the bucket water to spell it hot. He threw in the soap chips and started cleaning out his sponge so he could wipe down the table top he'd dirtied before starting back on the caldrons.

It felt good to clean, Harry thought as he worked the inside of the caldron. There was something honest and natural about sweating with the work, and no matter how poorly or foolishly he worked, the caldron could only get better.

He finished the first and set it up on the end of the table before he walked over and looked in the rest of the caldrons lined up beside the third-year's table. He grabbed what looked like another difficult job, and put himself back to work.

He barely noticed when the third-year left, except that his sponge and bucket were suddenly vanished beneath his hands.

"Get out, Mr. Potter." Snape said, sitting down at his desk and waving his hand out at him.

"No, Professor." Harry replied, remembering the sickened look Snape held just the week before.

Harry cast his hands clean and summoned a chessboard onto the desk in front of him. He carefully started setting it up, accio'ing dust and transfiguring each piece before he set it down.

"Your turn to be white, Professor, what's your move?" Harry asked, looking up to see Snape sneering at him still.

"If you were foolishly inexperienced again today and some man died on your watch, it is not my concern, Mr. Potter, nor is it my job to coddle you. Go find a woman to cry on if it's your need, surely you can afford one," Snape growled out.

Harry felt his annoyance snap, and forced his glare back behind a neutral expression.

"You told me once my company is much like the crucio curse. I've experienced that multiple times, professor, but never for being in your presence. Personally, I'd prefer to play a dozen Evan's Gambits through with you, rather than feel my bones trying to force their way through my skin again, but that's me." Harry said, barely keeping himself from snarling. "Would you prefer to play black instead?"

I was just killing people, get the hell off my back.

"So you threaten me into your company, that's your technique now, is it? You'll find I'm not easily threatened, and I'm certainly not impressed." Snape replied, his eyes flashing as he stood up from behind his desk and banished the cauldrons to line up on one side of the room.

"And you'll find I'm not the one threatening you, and I'm unsure if you're capable of being impressed, and I'm done playing word

games. Make a choice." Harry replied, his tone coming out cold and dangerous, though he hadn't meant it to be.

"Checkmate, Mr. Potter. Go back to your wolf book then boy, I have work to do." Snape growled, grabbing up one of the cleaned caldrons.

Harry watched as Snape's angry demeanor vanished as he started pouring water in the caldron and carefully rinsing it out before casting a very gentle evanesco.

"Why must they be cleaned by hand?" Harry asked.

"That you should have known before you ever entered this room, Mr. Potter, it was your first summer assignment," Snape said as he set the caldron on the side of the work table.

"And the answer?," Harry pressed.

"Look it up," Snape said, wiping down the table quickly after sanitizing the third-year's discarded sponge.

"I'm not going to," Harry shrugged.

"All spells in a caldron will affect the outcome of the potion. I can account for a simple evanesco, but not as effectively for the more deep-scrubbing spells," Snape replied distractedly, beginning to efficiently collect instruments from around the room.

"Alright," Harry replied simply, taking out *To Kill a Mockingbird* and starting to read.

Harry was two chapters in, reading as the three children got to know each other when a soft click caught his attention, and he looked up to see Snape standing across from him, taking his hand from the

chessboard, evidently having moved the white kingpawn up two places. Harry raised an eyebrow at the professor questioningly, and the man's face didn't even twitch.

"It's simmering," Snape snarled.

Harry glanced at Snape's caldron, set over a light fire, and nodded, placing his pawn on E5 and slowly setting his book aside.

They played in silence, as Harry inspected Snape's face, though he wasn't sure why he bothered. Snape's hard, slightly angry expression never shifted under his gaze.

"I will not get prettier with your staring, Mr. Potter, if that is what you are wondering," Snape snarled finally, glancing up from their game.

"It wasn't," Harry replied honestly, continuing to study the man.

I need to know if he's loyal, Harry thought desperately.

Harry returned to the silence, finding nothing to say, and turned his mind back to the game.

"Why are you here?" Snape snarled randomly, "Before this year you seemed to have no interest in learning."

"At Hogwarts?" Harry asked, blinking.

"If that's not obvious to you," Snape replied, raising his thin eyebrows.

Harry sighed, giving up staring at Snape's face. He wasn't learning anything through it.

"Why are you spitting vitriol today?" Harry returned, matching Snape's glare with as pleasant an expression as he could make.

"It's hardly rare," Snape sneered mockingly.

"I've been at Hogwarts for six years, that's hardly an uncommon event either," Harry pointed out.

"So that's your deal, I give you an unnecessary answer and you return the so-called favor?" Snape replied, looking disgusted.

"Yes," Harry replied.

"Very well, then tell me your answer,"

You first, Harry thought, though he refused to voice it.

I can't tell him that I need Hogwarts for an alibi, Harry thought, almost smiling at the idea of sharing such information with the likely untrustworthy vitriolic man in front of him.

He wanted to get up and wander, or grab something to fiddle with, but he settled on splitting half of his attention on the chess game, and taking his move before he made his answer.

"When I was eleven, Hogwarts was my only ticket to the magical world," Harry started.

And out of the Dursleys, he added silently, glad to feel his occlumency protecting his privacy.

"When I was fourteen, I fancied it my duty to return, to be the concurring hero yet again," he said honestly.

Snape snorted and took his turn.

"Hell, that was my mind-set last year," Harry admitted, shaking his head.

"And instead you killed your godfather," Snape sneered.

"Fuck you," Harry said, staying his hand with his piece in the air, "I can say that, you don't."

I'll walk out of here, Harry threatened silently, knowing he wouldn't.

"And why the difference?" Snape asked, sounding calmer as he took his turn, "me saying it or not hardly changes the past."

"That's true," Harry said, sighing, "And I don't know," he admitted, taking his turn. "If nothing else I have to respect and protect his memory, and respect and protect mine." Harry said, spinning the words around in his head. They sounded accurate.

"Protect your memories from the truth? Noble, as always, Mr. Potter" Snape drawled.

"You're a bastard, do you know that?," Harry asked, staring at Snape's face searchingly.

Why is he like this?

"I am," Snape replied, "but I'm also very often right,"

"Yeah, but you don't have to be right about Sirius," Harry said, knowing he was speaking nonsense and not caring for the moment, "I died that day,"

Why does it suddenly bug me when Snape's a bastard? Harry wondered as he watched Snape take his turn.

It's always bugged me.

It's different now.

I expect him to be respectful to me, Harry thought, wanting to shake his head at himself. He'd started to like Snape, accidentally.

I'll have to kill him if he's a traitor, Harry reminded himself, imagining the man dead beneath his hand and hating it.

"Wounds cut only as deep as you take them to," Snape replied.

"That sounds like bullshit," Harry replied crassly, not sure what it even meant.

"It means your incessant over-dramatization of your evidently overwhelming suffering only worsens it, and it's hardly a heroic habit in any case."

"Lovely, thanks for that," Harry replied, again forcing himself from rolling his eyes.

"You're dramatic, Mr. Potter, and it isn't good for anyone," Snape said as he made his chess move.

"And you're repeating yourself, as you don't often like to," Harry replied, taking his own turn before he glanced up at the man.

"I'm curious at this change, I've admitted that freely," Snape replied, taking his turn. "You've gone from a furious, arrogant cheat who fancies himself a hero into what seems to be an interesting man notably quickly."

"Thank you for summing that up for me, cheers," Harry replied, pretending to toast the man.

"If you are to mock me, at the very least do it with a cup in your hand," Snape growled, waving his wand at a locked cabinet which promptly jumped open, revealing what looked to be bottles of alcohol

within.

And now to be poisoned, Harry thought.

He'd be mad to try and kill me here, when he publicly announced this detention to the entire Great Hall, Harry thought quickly.

He could still probably hide it though, loyal or not he's managed to either lie to Dumbledore or Voldemort before, he could likely lie about this. And no one would be ready to believe that Snape offered me a drink in detention today.

And poisons don't have to be deadly. There could be Veritaserum in whatever glass or drink he gives me.

Though how would he give it to me and not both of us?

Professor Snape is offering to drink with me?

"What do you suggest?" Harry asked, raising his eyes at the cabinet.

"Brandy's all I've got in here. It's a wonder I don't drink myself into poverty after every third-years class."

"Brandy and chess. Not a half-bad detention, professor" Harry said in thanks as Snape accio'd over the brandy.

Harry transfigured them both snifters and Snape filled his glass.

"Specifically third years?" Harry asked, playing his chess move casually, pretending to ignore Snape's quick shift from obnoxious to welcoming.

He's trying to gather information, Harry thought, focusing more on keeping his face clear and his mind hidden.



"They're old enough to care about house points, aren't terrified into submission by my black robes, are overflowing with testosterone and aren't old enough to have figured out that mixing random ingredients into a pot is not only fun, but potentially deadly," Snape answered lightly, filling his own snifter and picking it up to take a large gulp of the alcohol.

Harry watched Snape drink and took up his own glass, sipping at it carefully.

"And so, your answer then, why are you more of a bastard today than you were before?" Harry asked.

"I am forced me to waste my valuable time in the company of a teenager. I doubt I need to remark any further upon the unceasing disrespect and irresponsibility with which you've led the last five years, but do let me know if that's not the case," Snape answered.

That's not why it's worse today.

"You're just verbally avoiding the question," Harry replied.

"I am following your example, Mr. Potter," Snape said.

Fair

"Fair," Harry replied.

Harry took his turn, thinking he was perhaps winning, and shifted his concentration to search for a new conversation.

This is too light-hearted, Harry thought, feeling his stomach sink suddenly and struggling to keep his neutral expression. He'd been killing family members in the streets and in their beds barely more than a half-hour before. He wasn't meant to be sitting playing chess and dodging useless questions.

Then what am I supposed to be doing, screaming at the sky in the quidditch pitch? That would only give my secrets away.

And again I'm wondering how I'm supposed to deal with it, Harry thought, staring at the wall as he took a large sip of his alcohol, still struggling to maintain his bland smile.

Harry forced himself to focus on the smooth brandy pleasantly burning its way down his throat.

He enjoyed the oaky taste.

He'd thought years before that he only liked alcohol for the simple, tingling feeling it brought in its wake, but he found he could enjoy what Snape had poured him.

This would be one way to deal, Harry thought, staring at the dark liquid.

And become a useless drunk?, hardly.

But am I supposed to just square with the fact that I killed Gabriel Darlin in his kitchen as soon as I got out of class?

"Brooding, ?" Snape asked, sounding concerned.

"This is good," Harry complimented, pulling himself out of his thoughts and raising his glass.

"As if you know something about alcohol," Snape sneered.

"I don't, but I know what tastes good," Harry replied, hearing his toneless voice and wanting to groan. He'd still not mastered pulling his feelings from the public.

"That only means it's a good alcohol if I trust in your taste on the matter," Snape replied.

"Fair," Harry replied, tipping his head.

"I'm so relieved to have your approval," Snape snarked.

"You're an ass, but in any case thanks for the drink," Harry replied, starting to get control over his thoughts again and blessing his occlumency.

"I am, and don't get used to it," Snape answered.

Harry toasted the man, and drank, wishing he trusted the man enough to drink his memories away for awhile.

How am I dealing with this?

~~HP~~

Harry left an hour later when Snape and he had finished their drinks and the game. They'd tied, but Harry didn't mind, preferring to keep his concentration on Snape's face and and miss his checkmate than pay attention and miss the spy. He'd come to think that there was no emotion Snape couldn't hide, and he suspected none that the man couldn't fake, but if was going to be forced to waste his time in Snape's office, the least he could do was attempt to make the time valuable.

But I suspect that if I fail at legitimizing the man, I'll never be able to tell if he's acting or no, Harry thought as he closed the dungeon door behind himself and started down the closest route to Griffindor tower. It was ten o'clock; he had less than six and a half hours to sleep before he had to wake up to get to Hagrid's.

Pomfrey said my minimum was five hours, Harry reminded himself

as approached the Fat Lady.

"Milkweed," Harry said before the portrait asked for the password, reaching the door just as it opened and let him through.

"Evening, Harry," Neville yawned from one of the couches of the common room, papers strewn around him.

"What's that then?" Harry asked as he walked.

"Intern contract. I have to have it all read and signed by Friday." Neville replied. "What's up with you and Ron?"

"We've changed too much. Grown apart," Harry replied simply.

"I suspected as much," Neville said with a shrug, "I figured it was bound to happen. You've always been older than him, haven't you then?"

"I dunno," Harry replied, walking to the steps up to the dorm.

"Well in any case, good night," Neville said simply.

"Good night," Harry replied walking up the stairs, deciding he liked Neville a good deal.

He set his alarm for 4:20, as always, going through his schedule in his head and deciding he liked it. He got in his allowed hour of exercise and seven hours of work, all while allowing for at least three meals and for flexibility for what needed to be done.

4:20: Wake up

4:30 → 5:30 Hagrid

5:30 → 6:00 Shower, change, get to Great Hall

6:00 → 6:15 Breakfast

6:30 → 9:00 Dumbledore

9:00 → 9:20 Second Breakfast

9:30 → 10:30 Class

10:30 → 11:30 Class

11:30 → 12:30 Lunch

12:30 → 1:30 Class

8:00 → 10:00 Detention/Other

10:00 PM: Finish Detention or Sleep

~~HP~~

Hello all, it's update day, very exciting, please read and review!

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~~HP~~

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Dumbledore didn't look pleased.

Harry studied his expression as the man read his strategy over, as the man's wrinkles slowly bent downward and started to deepen. The sparkle in the man's eye slowly died and without it the man looked horribly, horribly sad.

"We have a long way to go, you and I." Dumbledore said finally.

Crap.

"I know, professor, I'm no strategist, but I'll get there, I'll swear that," Harry promised, feeling his eyes harden with the thought. He'd finished Art of War in Advanced Transfigurations the day before; it was a short book and he hoped that in ten days he'd have to go back to the muggle library. He'd read their entire section if he needed to.

"This is a good strategy, it may have saved lives." Dumbledore said, still staring at the paper.

Harry felt his mind stop for a second.

"Er...you just said we have a long way to go, that sounded rather disappointed," Harry said, blinking.

Dumbledore glanced up at him over the paper and Harry thought he saw the man's sadness only grow.

"I did, my boy, but not about how much you have to learn," Dumbledore said finally.

"I confess, I'm confused, professor." Harry said.

"Nevermind that. I suspect it's...almost irrelevant," the headmaster said, shaking his head and putting the paper down on the maps on the round table before him.

"Professor?" Harry started, blinking. "What do we have a long way to go on?"

"Just an old man's ramblings, young Harry. I simply thinking that this war will be long for the both of us, something that I suspect we both already know at this point," Dumbledore replied.

"It will," Harry agreed seriously.

"Indeed. Moving on, yes, this is a good strategy. You would force the enemy to leave his stronghold and enter the fight by denying him access to outside oxygen and waiting until his own supplies falter. " Dumbledore pointed out.

"Yes, professor," Harry replied, nodding.

"Another point I'd like you to consider and answer, is that this takes a long time, and involves quite a lot of danger on the part of your fighters, It is vital to note of course, that an anti-apparation ward is a double edged sword. If the fight goes sour, we would be equally incapable of retreating or calling in reserves,"

True, Harry thought, wishing he'd devoted more time doing the strategy problem rather than reading books on the subject.

"You know..." Harry started thinking over the subject again, "you're right. I was being stupid in fighting them at all. I was halfway there,

but just didn't think of it enough. Don't fight them at all. Just block them in and wait until you know it's safe to enter,"

Dumbledore blinked, and Harry thought for a second that the man looked disappointed again.

"And what if you don't have time?" Dumbledore said, after a long pause.

"And the goal is to get into the building?" Harry clarified. Dumbledore nodded slowly, sighing and running his eyes over the map distractedly.

Walk in, Harry thought to himself.

This is my general, Harry told himself suddenly, I need this man to train me, perhaps I should say that idea out loud.

He's untrustworthy, he tells everyone too much. Bill said the Order is riddled with spies. The Daily Prophet will be announcing me as the Thestral Killer after a week.

He's teaching me now, and I have to learn. He's respecting me now, he'll respect my secrets, Harry told himself.

And where did I get that impression though?

He is respecting me now, I know that, Harry thought, looking up and catching Dumbledore's tired, quiet gaze.

When did information get out because of him?

There are spies in the Order and Dumbledore seems to be ignoring that.

Information hasn't actually gotten out though, Harry considered,



trying to pull up any memory of Dumbledore's indiscretion and failing.

In the best case, he doesn't tell anyone, and I don't think he's likely to.

And in the worst case scenario, Dumbledore tells, and the story explodes, does it harm the war? Harry wondered, sighing.

People are less likely to join me as a murderer...

I'll probably be more likely to get people willing to truly fight though, Harry thought.

Perhaps not as many, but perhaps better men.

I mean better killers, Harry forced himself to think.

People are getting sick of Ministry's ineffectiveness, and the Order is invisible and complacent, Harry thought, I have to change that, and it's probably easier without being branded a murderer, but Scrimgeour isn't likely to put me in jail and it might not even negatively affect the war if he tries.

Hell, if Scrimgeour puts me in jail I'll walk out of it, Harry thought, almost laughing at the thought.

"Dumbledore, I have an idea, but it involves something relatively confidential," Harry started.

Dumbledore paused, his eyebrows raising slightly in evident surprise.

"And the strategy?" Dumbledore asked.

"Walk in," Harry replied.

Dumbledore's eyes widened slightly.

"Somewhat like you did into my office yesterday morning, I presume?" Dumbledore said as he walked behind his desk and slowly sat down.

Harry smiled and nodded.

"Yes, professor,"

"I was grateful you left my wards intact, they're difficult to raise," Dumbledore replied lightly, though the light didn't return to his eyes.

Harry didn't reply, and heard the silence stretch out horribly.

I shift my magical signature and kill people, Dumbledore, Harry thought, wondering if his mentor's quiet reaction would be easier to take if he'd just said the truth outright.

"You can change your magical signature?" Dumbledore asked, his eyebrows furrowing slightly.

Damn, he's fast, Harry thought.

"Yes," Harry replied, feeling his respect for the man rise.

"You could forge any signature you wanted, take money out in anyone's name at any wizarding bank in the world," Dumbledore said.

"I could also just walk in, professor," Harry pointed out, blinking rapidly.

"Indeed, but I think I like the thought I have better. I may have a favor to ask of you, but I'm not quite sure yet."

He needs me to steal something? Seriously? Harry thought, forcing himself to stop blinking out his surprise.

"Oh my boy, it seems we're running late. Let us continue our discussion of the battle of 32 McAlister Way, as was this battle called," Dumbledore said finally, his direly focused expression melting into a cheerful, distracted look.

He shifts faces as well as Snape, Harry noted to himself, walking over to the wooden table.

"Ignoring the ability to shift signatures, we'll look at what would happen in this situation if we had not the time and were not desperate enough to need your strategy, as was true in this case," Dumbledore started.

~~HP~~

That Wednesday night in Remedial Potions, Harry and Snape drank, and played chess, and were silent until they exchanged 'Good night's. Harry gave Luna his copy of his speech, and stumbled off to bed.

Friday night Harry waited by the Forbidden Forest, and the sphinx came.

"Don't let talk be wasted speech," was all the sphinx said, and Harry felt magic skimming over his mind where he had his occlumency stopping it.

"You know how to go through wards like a sphinx, now learn how to go through minds," ordered the sphinx, and then Harry felt nothing at all in his mind, but the sphinx was still staring at him with the same focused intensity.

"Occumency is a ward," Harry said, practically feeling like his mind was opening up as he realized it.

"Friday learn what speech is never wasted, as you do not know with your own," The sphinx replied, and returned to the forest.

And why do I wait another week, why did I wait a week for that?, Harry wondered, staring after him, even as he felt almost dizzy with what he'd learned.

I should have thought of that! Occlumency wards are wards, of course they are! Damn it!, Harry cursed himself, running back to the thestral, hoping to be on time for his detention.

"Enter," Snape called as always from behind the thick door. Harry pushed it open, stepping into the protection and privacy wards and saw Snape bent over his desk, obviously working.

Better that way, Harry thought, heading to a stool in front of one of the work tables and disappearing behind his book.

He felt his magic forward, and felt something strong, leather, black around Snape, and it was definitely a ward, and it had a keyhole.

Harry barely managed to keep his eyes passing over the words of his book as he shifted his magical signature, and let his magic touch on what rested beyond the ward.

He was looking at another one of Draco Malfoy's horrid failures of an essay for the year.

Legilimency is working, Harry thought in surprise.

And this is useless, he thought, watching as Snape's hand wrote 'T, Fix this' in his tight, careful script on the top of the essay.

Harry pushed his magic deeper, He felt frustrated, suddenly, and bored, and then he was worried, and watching as Draco shifted his

weight back and forth in a dark, cold classroom.

"That was foolish. You cannot afford mistakes, Draco, because if you are expelled-"

Harry heard the voice vibrating around in his skull and winced against the memories, suddenly grateful Snape's deep drawl was so different from Voldemort's painful hiss.

"I didn't have anything to do with it, all right?" Draco growled, and Harry knew immediately that he was lying and worried because the boy still had not learned occlumency when it was only going to get more important.

"I hope you are telling the truth, because it was both clumsy and foolish. Already you are suspected of having a hand in it." Snape said, leaning forward and trying to convince the proud boy.

"Who suspects me?" Draco scoffed angrily. "For the last time, I didn't do it, okay? That Bell girl must've had an enemy no one knows about – don't look at me like that! I know what you're doing, I'm not stupid, but it won't work – I can stop you!"

Snape paused, trying not to scoff at the idiot boy who hadn't realized he'd been legilimized the whole time, who was too proud to learn, just like the Potter boy.

"Ah... Aunt Bellatrix has been teaching you Occlumency, I see. What thoughts are you trying to conceal from your master, Draco?" Snape said, knowing the Dark Lord would take it that way, there was no question.

"I'm not trying to conceal anything from him, I just don't want you butting in!"

He sounds so much like a child, Harry thought, wanting to shake his

head at the boy.

"So that is why you have been avoiding me this term? You have feared my interference? You realize that, had anybody else failed to come to my office when I had told them repeatedly to be there, Draco –"

"So put me in detention! Report me to Dumbledore!" the boy challenged.

"You know perfectly well that I do not wish to do either of those things," Snape replied, looking thoughtful, and suddenly Harry couldn't see Draco anymore, there was just a light tan wallpaper across from him, and someone was coming through his wards.

New memory, Harry thought, trying to watch it and feel his own body at the same time, trying to keep his eyes tracking back and forth on the book page in front of him.

He was sitting in his small living room, which he'd never been able to feel like anything but a tiny, padded cell, and Narcissa was crying in front of him, crossing lines of propriety he'd never thought she'd allow herself with him.

"Severus," she whispered, "My son...my only son..."

"Draco should be proud," said Bellatrix stupidly, "The Dark Lord is granting him a great honor. And I will say this for Draco: He isn't shrinking away from his duty, he seems glad of a chance to prove himself, excited at the prospect --"

Narcissa began to cry in earnest, gazing at him beseechingly, clearly not foolish enough to have missed that Draco was being sent out for the slaughter, punishment for Lucius's continued failings.

Snape said nothing, looking away from the sight of her tears to spare

her pride, and gazed out of his window, trying to think of something he could do.

"Distracted, Mr. Potter?" Snape's voice said, and for a moment Harry concentrated on the memory, trying to see who he was talking to.

Harry blinked back out of Snape's mind, cursing himself as a fool.

"Yes, sir," Harry replied.

I forgot to turn the pages, Harry thought, glancing from Snape's face to the book in front of him.

"I'm tired," Harry explained.

True enough, he thought, stifling a yawn at the thought.

He went back to his book when he saw Snape return to marking papers, making sure to keep his eyes darting back and forth, and the pages turning, as he concentrated on his magic again.

He was in Dumbledore's office, and Dumbledore had just found the cruelest thing a man could order a subordinate to do, and it was necessary, and it would save a life, but he hated it.

"I can't refuse," He said, standing up, and hated how Dumbledore's face melted with relief.

"Thank you, Severus, this is beyond cruel," Dumbledore said.

"Such is war," Snape barely made out, starting out of the office so he could be alone and drink.

What did he promise?, Harry wondered, as Snape seemingly pulled his mind back to Edward Snipes' paper he was reading.

Harry pulled his mind back to his own book, making sure to turn the page and try to figure out what he'd missed in Scout's story.

"Your time is up," Snape said, exactly on the hour, and Harry thanked him and left.

He got back to his dorm to find an owl perched on his trunk, staring at him.

Harry untied the letter from the serene bird's leg, blinking in surprise at the seemingly endless layers of wards over the thing. Harry took the envelope gently, recognizing his magical signature in the ward's keyholes; this letter was for him, and only him.

He sat on his bed, surrounding himself with privacy wards before he slowly pulled the paper out of the the unsealed envelope.

Names, Harry saw, blinking and counting them quickly.

37 random names, what the-

No-

Harry looked up, staring at his bedpost as he tried to process what he'd just received. He checked for a signature, and found the letter was predictably anonymous.

Dumbledore, Harry thought, jumping off his bed.

Five hours of sleep, Harry thought, stopping with his hand on the door. He needed his five hours of sleep.

I can wait, Harry told himself, folding the letter and adding his own ward to hide it in his pocket.

I can wait.



Harry forced himself to strip off his robes and fold them carefully into his trunk. He pulled off his muggle clothing beneath his robes and left his jeans folded on top of the rest of his clothing, and threw his shirt into his pile of dirty laundry. He pulled on his pajama pants and climbed into his bed, lying down slowly and thinking about anything but the parchment in his robes pocket.

~~HP~~

He ran up to Dumbledore's office as soon as he'd finished his riding and had gotten showered and dressed, sure that Dumbledore would know to be there. He walked through the wards, knocked, and entered when Dumbledore called for him.

"These are absolutely undoubted?" Harry asked as soon as he was inside the cramped room.

"And politically useless," Dumbledore replied, his face absolutely clear of emotion, but for the notable lack of life in his eyes. The man looked like a machine, and Harry scanned him for curses affecting his mind, almost wanting to find something, if it meant he could get that dead look out of the old man's eyes. "I'll get you the reasons on Monday," the elderly man promised in that same sickening voice.

"You were a lovely child, my boy," Dumbledore said, his mouth dipping horribly as he spoke.

"Thank you, professor," Harry replied, wanting to cry as he turned and left the quiet room, the damning list still in his hand.

He went straight to the thestrals, casting invisibility spells over himself as he went. He could apparate, but he wanted to walk and he knew he had the time. Somehow the walk felt important to do, though he couldn't say why.

The Hogwarts gray stone was eerily familiar and Harry ran a hand along it lightly, feeling the bumps and cracks beneath his palm. He passed classroom door after door, all silent in the morning, though he easily imagined them full of shouting children throwing notes back and forth and spelling each other. The hall seemed to echo with unfitting silence; it was supposed to be filled with children and robed professors shouting at students not to run and owls flying about toward their master's. Instead the hall was absolutely silent, even the swishing of Harry's robes magically blocked away. He passed, feeling like a ghost, down the staircases, skipping a few steps that would cave in or cover his feet with a stinky, grainy goo. He made it outside, and to the forest, and Mrrowerl was waiting for him.

Thomas Thomsen died like Johnathan Castlan, beside his wife and in his bed, though Harry left the wife that time. Stanley Perick and Maxwell M. Mamble's deaths were much like Jugson's, outside their homes. Harry killed Vladmir Schultz in his living room, as he hadn't done before, but it seemed just like the others.

He remembered Pomfrey and ate lunch outside a small restaurant, glad that the wind and cold had chased the rest of the costumers inside. He ate alone, forcing his eyes to stay on the page of *To Kill a Mockingbird* as he read and refused to think about anything else. He paid the overly-friendly waitress and walked back to the deserted alleyway where Mrrowerl was left hiding.

Mrrowerl brought him to a large, ornate house in the middle of a muggle street, for Jason Rowle. Harry walked in and snuck around the house, silencing his every step until he was standing in the doorway to a fancy kitchen room, watching a man no older than Charlie bossing around a house-elf.

"Two eggs, scrambled, I want breakfast for lunch you stupid creature, how complicated is that?"

"Not complicated, Young Master Jason, sir, no not at all," the

house-elf was saying as she rushed toward the stove, already calling a pan onto it.

House-elf magic feels weird, Harry thought, studying it lightly and feeling like he was watching seven spells happen at once when the house-elf broke the eggs into a bowl beside the frying pan.

"Do you have my outfit for Friday picked out yet?" The man asked as he toyed with a fork.

"Yes, young master," the house-elf replied as she called milk from the fridge and poured it carefully into the bowl.

"And why the bloody hell are you still calling me that?!" The man yelled, throwing a fork at the house-elf's head.

To Harry's surprise the house-elf simply spun around and casually caught the fork and set it on the counter.

"Because that's what you are, young master," the house-elf replied.

"Aren't you supposed to accept punishments when you do something wrong?" The man asked, stomping over and ripping the fork off the counter.

"Perhaps, yes, when Yerly is doing something wrong, but Yerly is not, young master," The house-elf said.

"I told you not to call me that!" The man said, slamming his hand down on the edge of the table. Harry almost wanted to hit him to stop the sickeningly childish behavior.

"You asked me why I did, young master," Yerly said.

"My father died! I'm the master of the house now! Call me Master Rowle or Master Death Eater whatever you want, but call. me.

Master."

Jason Rowle. It's him, Harry thought, nodding to himself and sending out his spell.

Jason's balanced for a second, held stiff by the spell, and crumpled sideways when the magic released, the corpse's head banging against the wooden table before it landed on the ground.

The house-elf started to scream and Harry collected and transfigured the dust around the body into a My-Little-Pony lying beside the corpse.

Harry watched as the house-elf started to throw curses in every direction, feeling almost numb as he stepped out of the way of all of them.

"Yendy? Yendy, what's going on?!" A woman called, sounding panicked. Harry heard footsteps tumbling down the stairs behind him and stepped out of the way.

For some reason, he felt like he was supposed to watch this. To know what he was doing when he did it.

"Good Merlin! Jason!," The woman yelled, rushing toward the man. The house-elf stopped screaming and looked frantically around, tears pouring from his eyes.

"He's-he's," The woman stuttered, bodily forcing up the corpse as she attempted to hug it to her.

"MASTER!" The house-elf sobbed.

"Jason, Jason, no, come on," The woman sobbed, pushing her hand against his neck to check his pulse.

"Mistress needs me," The house-elf said suddenly, staring at the woman through his tears. "Mistress, let me help you, Mistress, let's get you up, Yendy will call the police wizards, Mistress, Yendy will do it, let's get you up," The house-elf said, approaching the woman and starting to push her from the corpse.

"No!, no, he's fine, he'll be fine, he's just-" The woman cried.

"Come now, Mistress, you should be flooing to your parents home, now. Let's go." Yendy said, pulling at her.

"GET AWAY FROM ME!" The woman screamed, hovering over the body.

"No, Mistress," The house-elf refused, shaking her head. "Come on, now,"

Enough, Harry thought, turning away and walking from the house.

They deserve privacy, Harry thought as he silently closed the door behind him.

I'll never wait again, he decided.

Harry got outside and found Mrrowerl growling at a screaming neighbor trying to hex him. Harry shielded himself from the spells and climbed onto the thin animal.

And again, he thought, sighing to himself.

"Brad Sherpley Cobbler," he whispered to the creature.

He found Brad Cobbler in the street and killed without ever leaving Mrrowerl's back.

It was eight o'clock when he started home, allowing himself to cry as

he went back, somehow wishing that he were covered head to toe with blood. It would make it real, at least.

He landed on the Hogwarts grounds and stared at the familiar castle.

He glanced down at his clothing and found them still clean, if wind struck. It was nine o'clock. He could get seven hours of sleep if he went immediately.

Harry headed toward the Room of Requirement, asking only for violence.

He fought silently, jumping over curses as he blocked a dozen others, clenching his teeth against the pain that ripped open his flesh and bled until he found time enough to heal it. He fought and the burlap bag corpses exploded sand into his wounds, and he rolled and shielded and cast until he was gasping on top of a floor of sandbag corpses, and all he wanted to do was shower away the sand.

He walked away, blinking the grains out of his eyes and feeling like he could deal.

God damn, feels good, Harry thought as he turned on a shower in the griffindor boy's bathroom and cold water fell over his itching healed skin, slowly washing away the blood.

Skin healed too many times scars, Harry saw, looking down over his body and only then noticing the white lines and marks that covered his arms and chest. His left leg was still streaked with the grotesquely thick scar that ran down from his knee.

I'm starting to be a soldier, Harry sighed, staring at where his scars stretched over new muscle, looking all the more painful for it.

He slowly set the dial colder, concentrating on the feeling of it washing away his hot sweat. He soaped up and washed his hair as

he felt a slight headache start in the front of his mind, protesting the cold.

He stepped out as soon as he was clean and found himself staring at the floor as the water evaporated off him. He still felt dirty.

It's physiological, Harry told himself, feeling feint. But he felt he still had sweat all over him, that the water dropping down his spine was salty and horrid and he wanted to get it the hell off of him.

If anything, it's sweat, Harry told himself, forcing himself to physically roll his eyes. You played quidditch, the idea is hardly formidable to you.

I'm an idiot, Harry thought, rolling his head up and staring at the ceiling, trying to get himself calmed down.

I haven't even gotten their blood on me, why do I feel like I should be still covered in blood?

And suddenly the feeling wasn't of sweat rolling down his back, but blood, he was sweating blood and bathing in it, and somehow it wasn't his anyway, and he was sick and going to throw up.

Harry's stomach rolled up into his throat, burning as it went and Harry had to catch himself, swallowing rapidly and forcing away the images of corpses next to muggle dolls until he'd remembered that it was necessary and that there was a reason to all of it, that the ponies were symbols of that, and that Voldemort had started a war.

Harry walked back into the shower, wanting to cry again and feeling a thousand times the arrogant fool Snape always said he was. There were thousands of men in the world fighting and killing for their country and their lives; he had no right to cry like it wasn't fair for him to be there too. He wasn't even the only wizard walking into streets and leaving screaming house-elves, and he wasn't close to the only

soldier to kill and leave terrified witnesses in his wake. He would do what was necessary, for his country and his life, as millions had done before him.

He went to bed and pushed his head into his pillow, forcing himself to clear his mind, and go to sleep.

He woke up feeling alive and cheerful, only to feel dread weigh down his stomach until it threatened to fall out of him entirely.

Again, he thought, unable to get the word out of his head as he forced himself to dress and head to the Great Hall to force himself to eat. Hagrid had told him that Sundays would be Buckbeak's day off from riding, and Harry figured he was getting practice enough keeping his pelvis tucked in and his heels down as he clamped his thighs onto the back of a flying creature.

He walked to the Forbidden Forest under his invisibility spells, wanting to cry as he saw Mrrowerl walking slowly toward him. He got on the creature's back and whispered a name and held on as the thestral started to run.

He trained that evening, showered, and slept.

He woke to Dumbledore's owl tapping at his window.

"Not more," Harry whispered aloud. He'd finished through half of the list the night before.

Harry gave the owl one of Hedwig's treats distractedly and took the letter, opening it quickly with his wand and pulling it out.

Dear Harry,

I'm afraid I can't meet with you this morning. Please find it in your heart to forgive me,



Albus Dumbledore

'Find it in your heart'? That's a bit extreme, Harry thought, burning the card in his hand and getting dressed in his athletic clothes for Hagrid. He would spend his extra time studying his strategy books, he decided.

"Well done, Harry! Even Buckbeak's lookin' happier with you up there, wit you keepin' yer pelvis from grinding its way into his poor back," Hagrid complimented that morning.

Harry nodded, and tried to smile, and continued concentrating on his seat as the hippogriff trotted in the circle.

"Let's try cantering some more, shall we?" Hagrid asked with a large grin.

"Sure," Harry replied, trying to keep his voice from sounding toneless, even as he managed not to feel.

It was necessary, Harry told himself as Hagrid took off the hippogriff's leadline and told him to give the animal a polite kick.

~~HP~~

He ate his second breakfast in silence the next day, grateful that his classmates around him shouted amongst themselves and let him sink into the third chapter of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and forget himself and his new bruises at least for a few moments.

He was interrupted by a growing quiet that seemed to take over the room. He looked up and saw the whole room bent over the newspaper, the only speaking a few people whispering as they read it aloud.

"Harry, you have to read this," Ginny said quietly, pushing the newspaper in front of her over towards him.

He knew what it was. He didn't want to read it.

THESTRAL

"Everyone was screaming"

Sixteen men, women, and teenagers across the United Kingdom died this weekend, all marked with a single, My Little Pony figurine to mark their killer. There is no twisting this into a spectacle, wizards and witches. There is no politics in this. Thestral's victims were Death Eater followers and good citizens alike, killed and left as a message to the world. But what the message is, no one can understand. All we know is that good wizards died this weekend, behind their wards in their homes and publically in the street, dropping without a word. A source who preferred to remain anonymous, a sister to a victim and witness to the crime, reported: "there was nothing to foresee. We were walking to the trick shop on Diagon Alley, and she just fell, headfirst to the pavement. I think she was gone before she landed, she didn't even flinch, and the sick doll just appeared beside her, out of nowhere. I looked around and screamed, soon everyone was screaming, and we saw a thestral taking off from one of the flat roofs of the Owl Emporium. That was all."

The ministry didn't know they were Death Eaters, Harry thought, feeling fear whip through him for a second.

I'll get the word out somehow.

"It's murder," Ginny said, conviction clear in her eyes.

Harry looked up from where he was in the article and pushed it into the center of the table.

"You were right," Hermione whispered, tears in her eyes, "there's no order to it. It's not someone fighting the Death Eaters, it's just a madman."

"It's sick," Ron said, grimacing, "I wish it was the Death Eaters, they at least deserve it,"

"Who are we to say they deserve to die? We just know they need to," Harry replied quietly, catching Ron's gaze.

"You're sick, do you know that?" Ron scoffed, staring at him. "Do you know how many people have died in my back yard? Those bastards deserve to die."

"I'm sorry," Harry said quietly, turning his head back to his food and continuing his day's second meal.

"And he eats, after reading this," Ron sneered, "I told you Hermione,"

"Shut up, Ron," Hermione said.

"Seriously," Ginny whispered. "Not the time,"

"Dumbledore," Hermione said, nodding her head toward the front table. Harry followed her eyes, hearing the room settle into silence around him as he watched Dumbledore slowly standing up from behind the head table.

"Students, I must profess a profound gratitude that this tragic news came at a time when the younger years were at their studies. This is an event for parents to tell their own youngsters, and I must ask you all to respect that right. Please keep this happening to yourselves, at least for today. Sixteen Death Eaters died this weekend, and we must respect their lives, even if we cannot support their livelihood. Classes are canceled for the day, and all are free to spend this time with their families if they check out with their house head."

Dumbledore announced before sitting back down.

Harry sat in silence and forced himself to eat as the students around him started to whisper, humming about the definitive statement that the victims were Death Eaters.

Dumbledore wants my forgiveness because he can't see me right now, not that he doesn't have time to, Harry thought, sighing to himself.

"Do you think Dumbledore's right? That they're all Death Eaters?" Hermione asked the table.

"He's got to be, he's Dumbledore, in't he?" Ron said.

"Do you think he had something to do with it?" Hermione asked.

"What?" Ginny scoffed, sounding instantly furious.

"Think about it, apparently he knows every single one of their names. That's at least suspicious isn't it?" Hermione asked.

"Seriously Hermione, get your fist out of being clever for a second and be a bit respectful, okay?" Ginny snarled.

"Woah, Ginny," Ron said, holding up a hand.

"I was just saying-" Hermione started.

"You were just making this sick massacre into one of your 'revelations' or whatever the fuck you call them. How about you just don't?" Ginny barked back.

"Let's just eat, alright?" Ron said, his eyes darting between the two and the newspaper in the middle of the table.

"A moment of silence," Hermione agreed, sounding choked. Harry looked up at her and saw tears in her eyes, but he didn't think there was anything to do about it.

Don't worry Hermione, you're right, Dumbledore gave me those names, and I-

Harry cut his own thoughts off, refusing to let himself joke about it.

I killed them, Harry thought firmly, I killed them because I needed to, and I'll be okay.

Harry looked up from his food, staring at the wall over Ginny's shoulder.

But I need to find a way to deal.

Harry walked out of Advanced Transfigurations at 1:30 PM with seventeen names to go through.

Shit, Harry thought as soon as he got outside. The ravenclaw quidditch team was practicing on the field.

Any of them may see the thestral, Harry thought, cursing his luck. He'd known that no one on the Gryffindor team could see them, and had left with a few of them at practice before, but he knew nothing about the Ravenclaw players.

Invisibility spells as always, Harry told himself, cursing his idiocy and the part of him that wished he hadn't figured it out, that he wouldn't be able to take off at all-

It's needed, Harry told himself. This war must be stopped and it's all I know to do right now.

He ran toward Mrrowerl as the creature stepped out the forest,

leaping and pushing his hand down on the creature's back to propel his leg up and over the creature, mounting heavily. Harry cast invisibility spells over the thestral as soon as he was on, glancing around to see if anyone had seen the thestral.

"Johnathan Gitlin," Harry ordered quietly, clamping his sore thighs over the creature and trying to appreciate the feeling of speed beneath him as Mrrowerl launched himself into a canter.

I'll have to silence his run, next time, Harry thought as he watched a few members of the Ravenclaw look over searchingly.

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